DOCTOR WHO

NOVELLAS

FALLEN GODS

JONATHAN BLUM & KATE ORMAN

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Daryl Joyce

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Foreword by Storm Constantine

When I was asked to write an introduction for this book, I had no idea what to expect from it, and was a little surprised by the request. I am not known for being an aficionado of Doctor Who, and my main experiences of it are the memories of childhood teatimes and the programme on TV that both terrified and enthralled me.

Seen later in life, those BBC sets have not travelled through time quite as efficiently as the character they framed, but the Doctor has his own magic and that has not been diminished either by time or by memory. The fact that he has endured, sometimes against great odds, is testament to that.

My qualification for speaking here is my own passion for the mythic, because in this novel the Doctor manifests in Bronze Age Thera; but I confess I was a little sceptical. My previous experience of spin-off novels from TV series has not been edifying. However, I trusted the publishers opinion enough to think they wouldnt have asked me to contribute if they werent sure Id like the book. And Im pleased to say that Fallen Gods has been a revelation to me; it has opened my eyes to the modern world of Doctor Who.

In this story, the melding of science fiction with myth is seamless and feels in no way contrived or unlikely. Throughout human history, knowledge and enlightenment have dragged superstition, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the realm of science.

What we perceive, in ignorance, to be supernatural is eventually revealed to be part of the workings of the universe, and perhaps that process is and will be ongoing, for as long as there are humans eager to probe the secrets of life.

Although the Doctor and his own mythology are the main components of the story, it is not just for the diehard Doctor Who fan, and will be enjoyed by any reader who appreciates good writing and has a fascination for the Golden Age of ancient times, when sirens haunted the mists of the wine-dark sea and the tragic Minotaur stamped through the echoing corridors of the labyrinth. The authors have brought the Minoan civilisation vividly to life with much authentic detail, sewing into their story colourful images of Greek and Cretan legend. The fallen gods include the Doctor himself, here recreated in the image of many trickster deities. He is the Fool of the Tarot,

reckless and unfathomable; the cosmic jester, who illumines potential yet speaks like a sphinx in riddles. He is a doomed fallen angel, Prometheus bringing the gift of fire, Icarus flying on wings of folly towards the sun. He is also Daedalus, whose vision and inventions are craved by kings. His character is complex; his wry wit matched by glimpses of a deep inner pain that spans the universe and beyond. It is inevitable that wherever he manifests in the streams of time and space, he changes them and diverts the current of the future. Therefore, he cannot help but be aware that as much as he is an agent for good, his intrusion can unwittingly spell death or non-birth for those who might otherwise have survived or existed. In this awareness lies his tragedy. He is an eternal child, yet ancient beyond imagination, as evanescent as a phantom. Deftly, his authors do not allow the reader to identify him fully, which is how it should be. He is like a shapeshifter: images and ideas of his appearance, personality and motives are in constant flux. He is, we can suppose, what we expect him to be, designed by our own desires and beliefs, which mirrors what he reveals to the priestess Alcestis on the nature of supernatural beings.

The relationship between the Doctor and Alcestis smoulders throughout the story, erotic without being sexual, a Greek tragedy of unconsummated love, which culminates in a skilful retelling of the myth of Prometheus. There are so many allusions to Greek legend in this novella, weaving in and around each other, that its a delight for any reader interested in the subject to try to spot them all. Im sure repeated readings would reveal more little treasures hidden in secret corners.

Fallen Gods has everything I look for in a novel or novella: a rhythmic and vivid style of writing, in-depth characterisation, realistic and sparkling dialogue, a well-paced plot and a satisfying denouement. The authors love of language is matched by their obvious affection for their main character, and a great sympathy for him too.

When any writer adds to the existing canon of a fictional character, they expand the myth, keeping it alive and dynamic. Doctor Who spans generations, and its appeal continues to attract new fans. Perhaps one of the reasons for its success is that within its framework anything is possible, nothing is pinned down in time and space.

It continues to evolve, because from its beginning no limits were placed upon it. It is not confined to a particular time in history, such as the early black and white TV

programmes, which were but one aspect of the Doctors evolution. The Doctor is an eternal hero, who can slip into any reality and change it. The universe is infinite, so the potential for Doctor Who stories is infinite. Its tempting to imagine what it would be like if he manifested in a time and place that is beyond human description.

You can only suppose that must happen to a Time Lord now and again!

The Doctor has come a long way from what I remember of those old TV episodes. I am happy to discover he is alive and well, because I used to love so much being scared by the series, no matter what nightmares they inspired. I am even happier to discover that darker aspects of the Doctor are being revealed, giving him more depth and fascination. He has stood the test of time, as a Time Lord should, of course. And his history is in safe hands with writers such as Jonathan Blum and Kate Orman. Its no less than he deserves.

Storm Constantine Stafford

One: Dance

Close your eyes, murmurs her teacher.

Alcestis, poised, touch of sun-baked sweat drying onto her. Finding her balance as she stands in the open fields. The odd foreign man behind her, pale and cool as ivory in the heat.

Inside her eyes, all is warm orange. Even with them shut, the Aegean sunlight is bright enough to burn inside. She stands, breathing just a little too hard, and listens to his voice pass slowly behind her.

Feel the wind? he asks. Just a light breeze. You can feel it against your skin.

Youre so light, if you lifted up just a touch, it could blow you away.

His words form a circle around her as he paces. Theres a rhythm to it. A tempo.

Swelling and fading. A slow, endless beat, slower even than your heart. Its the longest music in the world.

And she can feel it, spreading across her: individual points of gooseflesh on her arms and chest, the ever-so-slight change in the pressure of her flounced skirt against her legs. She relaxes into it, just lets herself feel the wind blowing through her, as if emptying her mind will make her as light as he says.

Hes right by her ear now, but softer than ever. You can feel it quickening now.

Alcestis shivers for a moment. His breath came against the wind, she could feel it rock her in a different direction. She shifts her balance, raises herself up, light on her toes, ready to take the first step.

Its got a good beat you can dance to it. Ask the local eagles. You know there are some people in the world for whom dancing isnt sacred? Oh, give them a tune and they can bounce about a bit, but thats as much as they know or care … They dont know what it means

to move with the world, not just through it.

She knows the dance, remembers from her time in the temple. This isnt so different.

The tempo is far slower, but she can find it now in the rhythm of the breeze playing across her skin, as it shifts direction, spirals and eddies, but always in the end leads back to the sea. And the counter-rhythm of his words winding around her.

Now take the wind to pieces. Its coming from so many directions at once, just look at one of them. Just feel the part thats moving across you, left to right.

She can feel the difference … the afternoon sunfire on her right, just that much warmer than the breeze on the other side. Both sides of her tingling now, shivering in the heat.

Now the other direction. Just feel the bit of the wind on your front. Its got its own rhythm, you can play the two of them against each other. Youll have to remember that, to keep control.

And now the other direction. Out of the plane, right angles to everything else, away from the ways you usually move. Straight up and down. You can feel the wind lifting you, cant you? You cant follow it, not yet, but you can feel this pull ready to launch you.

And now the other other direction.

You can feel the wind blowing from your past to your future. A breath inside you, fanning the little spark of fire at your core. Feel that now.

And its as clear and sharp as all the others the thrumming of her body, that shes never been able to pick out from her heartbeat. The currents blowing inside her, pulling her to the next moment. She can feel the rhythm running through each second, she knows how to move with it.

Alcestis, ready now to dance.

Now, up

And she blows away.

A moment later shes falling, legs flailing in search of the ground. When she hits its a smack across her chest, driving the breath from

her even as she tries to gasp.

Suddenly furious with herself, she rolls over in the dust, fighting to breathe, demanding of her body which piece of it has failed her.

She sits up, pushing her hair out of her face and plucking grass from the heavy black tresses. One of her earrings is gone, lost during her instant of flight.

She recognises the goat-track winding through the distance: shes up near the high side of the island, a short distance from the cliffs overlooking Kaménai. In an instant shes leaped halfway across the island. She thinks of those cliffs, six hundred feet down to the water, and is grateful that this gift shes discovered wasnt a half mile more prodigious.

By the time he finds her, on the goat-track, the sun is sinking low. The sunset brings colour to his pasty foreign skin, makes him look like hes blushing. No, she realises, he is flushed from excitement, triumph, awe, or the last run he took to catch her once he came over the hill. Theres a hint of shadow under his cheekbones, a sketch of crows-feet around his eyes, a look of amazement too fierce to be simple joy.

Well Im thoroughly impressed, he tells her.

Im not, the way I landed …

Halfway across the island, he says, as they turn and head for home. And only then does the low wonder in his voice reach her, and she begins to realise what shes just done.

How did I do it? How did I go so far?

He begins to explain, one of his complex tales full of moving hands and convoluted gestures. Well Id expected you to catch just the edge of one of the temporal currents, but instead you dived right into the middle of them. For a fragment of a second, you held yourself completely still.

It didnt feel like stillness! The Earth moved, rotating and revolving and so forth, and so the next moment there was something else underneath you. So I can just … vanish. Get away from them.

He frowns, suddenly stern. Well, that would confuse them, but I dont think it would hold their attention. So it does rather miss the point of the exercise. No, you need to be able to do more than stay still you

need to be able to move as you choose.

Catch the current, ride it at an angle, blend it into the other three dimensions of the dance. The way the currents round here are distorted, you can use them to move through space as well.

And keep riding them?

Mm, yes. Thats all flying is enough moments of not falling.

They walk together towards the sunset. It makes her think not of endings, but of all the days to come. It was up near here that shed first found him, on the morning before the sixth attack. Shed taken the day off to go walking on the high side of the island telling herself she wanted to look for a new design for her pottery among the leaves and flowers, but really just feeling Akrotiri itching under her skin. The town always scraped her nerves, but at least she usually knew what she wanted to escape. All shed had that day had been an unfocused twitchy desire to be anywhere else.

Maybe it had been Nisus, the previous night in the tavern. Shed first met him just after the fourth attack, as shed helped clear the rubble; she remembered him working in a diligent daze beside her, even as shed heard the awed whispers about how hed rushed into Cretheuss house to support the corner lintel the demons hooves just round the wall from him long enough to allow Cretheus and his daughters to get clear. Shed seen the look of disbelief creep across Nisuss face while they worked, as hed slowly realised what an unimaginable thing hed done, and the sight had been almost enough to make her forget herself and hold him.

Weeks had passed, and that night in the tavern hed been repeating his own legend, slopping wine down young Aeropes blouse in the telling. The family Cretheus had ceased to be the important ones in the story. His voice had lurched through the latest bellicose anthems, ready to war with anyone, just as soon as they knew whom.

Maybe it had been Nisus. Maybe Neleus the innkeeper, watering the drinks as always, goading old Cocalus for being Athenian by birth precisely the same way hed goaded him before the attacks, but now with the extra weapon of being able to jeer at his loyalties. They had danced in Athens at the news of Akrotiri being laid low, a tale Neleus used like a bludgeon. Using the worlds new cruelty to justify further little cruelties.

Maybe Nisus, maybe Neleus. Maybe herself, finishing her wine in

silence and leaving without making a fuss. Maybe a whole island that had known peace since the days of the first Minos, now so ready to dismiss its better nature as a pampered fantasy, to respond to ugliness in kind. One of the richest islands in all of Minoss empire, and they acted as if all their luxury and privilege had vanished overnight, such that decency was an indulgence they could no longer afford. Harsher than the loss of innocence was the loss of compassion and when shed realised she couldnt even weep for them, shed had to get out.

So she was wandering near the cliffs facing Kaménai when she first saw him falling.

More remarkable than simply being there to see him was the fact that she looked up; they had all lost the habit of raising their eyes. But Alcestis did, looking over the water towards the royal island, wondering whether shed be feeling this unsettled itch if her years over there had not come to such an abrupt end. And so she saw the speck plummeting towards the ocean from the sky.

Being a gods-fearing individual, she found the sight of a man being cast out of heaven, if not familiar, at least explicable. Still, it wasnt something Alcestis had ever seen for herself. Pelopia was always swearing shed seen a nymph flitting round her vegetable patch, or that twenty years ago a centaur had barged in on her when she was bathing (though probably only the equine half of the fellow would have taken any interest in Pelopia), but generally such creatures kept their profiles even lower than the people of Akrotiri kept their eyes.

It was only when the rainbow wings spread over his head that she thought perhaps she shouldnt be looking. Ah well, if this god were the sort that paraded himself in all his glory and then blinded those who stared, as the sun was known to do, it was too late now. The wind from Kaménai was sweeping him towards her.

Closer now, they werent wings instead a multicoloured canopy curving above, roped to his back. Not a god, then. No god would need to break his fall. An inventor, perhaps, or a sailor, expansive in his cunning, using a rainbow sail to catch the wind and slow his descent. If whatever god had taken him up had expected him to be shattered by his landing, theyd be surprised.

The man cleared the edge of the cliff with a few feet to spare, and swerved between the stubby trees to reach the open land. When he touched the ground he ran with the wind for a few paces, the rainbow-panelled canopy settling to earth behind him, then let forth a

triumphant, fierce breath declaring to all the world that he wasnt dead. His chestnut hair stuck out like a mane after tussling with the wind. He stood like a king surveying his new domain.

Well now. Thisll do.

He met her eyes, from across the clearing, then blithely let them go again. As if saying it was nice to meet her, but since she was probably going to flee in terror she had his permission to get on with it. Instead she approached him, as he busied himself gathering up the fabric of his wings.

And you are? she asked.

He smiled, like a cat with a mouse. Guess.

There are a hundred thousand men in the empire, each with his own name. I dont know enough of them to guess.

A man, then? Not a god?

Probably.

(A grin.) Youve no idea what a relief that is. (Then a sudden pout.) Not even half a god? Human on my mothers side, perhaps, with my father a divine bull from the heavens …

She couldnt be sure which of them he was mocking. Straight faced, she looked him up and down, the thick fabric of his elaborate clothes, his blue eyes and his wild hair.

Its not impossible.

Well thats something. Id hate to think I suggested a lack of possibilities.

Youd have to convince me, though.

Yes. Well, Im afraid that might have to wait for a while. You see, I was rather aiming for over there.

He pointed off the cliff towards Kaménai and went on packing his sail away. Theres a powerful updraft, threw me off course. I hadnt counted on it.

Theres always a wind near Kaménai. From the volcano. Volcano? Oh, of course.

This is Thera, after all. How does one usually get there? Theres a boat every day from Akrotiri. It goes right around to the

temple and palace.

Palace?

On the royal island.

Royal island? The volcano? You mean, a palace right on the slopes?

Of course.

Well theres chutzpah for you.

He finished balling up the fabric, and started down the path away from the cliff. She found herself moving alongside him. Could you possibly lead me to the docks? he asked. In Akrotiri? You see, I need to get over there rather urgently.

Cant you just fly there?

He looked bewildered, then took in the mass of silk he was holding, and beamed. Oh no, I dont fly. I just fall with a certain amount of style.

He calls himself the Doctor. Hes a big man more than five-and-a-half feet tall

but somehow gives a sense of smallness, as if he squeezes himself down to her size.

Perhaps that containment produces the pressure inside that drives him. His eyes are full of pride and insouciance, the hint of crows-feet around them suggesting an age that his lithe movements belie. The creases developing in his face speak of a wide-ranging, much-used mockery. They frame a perilous smile.

He had asked why she had been so able to accept his arrival, and she hadnt told him.

In the temple, in her young days, she had cultivated her awe. Even when the other priestesses had faded under the familiarity, seeing the gods as a source of easy blessing and the bulls as a source of noise, she had stood at night in the alabaster halls cut into the side of the mountain, her mind open even to a flicker of the Titans flame.

After years touching the cool fire of the Titans, then years of silence, even the Doctors colours seemed muted. But if it meant that she could talk to him where others would be tongue-tied, perhaps it was for the best.

Some nights after that first lesson, she stands on the edge of the cliff again

leaning into the wind, one foot out over the abyss. She breathes hard, feels the current inside lifting her, ready to tear her away from the moment. His torch, the only light, reveals just enough of them to hint at more.

The currents near the island are bent around the land. They dont just pull you through time, but through space as well. Thats how they move. Can you feel the angle its at?

From behind.

Lean into it. Find the balance.

She flexes, shivering, and pushes herself against the current, letting it support her. The world judders with her heart. But shes still there hes still there

flickering, insubstantial, his pale face looking like a hole in the night. The flames moving slower now, at just the wrong speed.

Good, good. Now just lean into it

She lets the wind and the current balance her between themselves. Turns to look at him, sees the look of awe on his face. Follows his gaze down, to where her foot is no longer on the ground.

She catches her breath, and doesnt fall.

Inside she leans again, feels herself buoyed up. Lets the wind carry her inland, the ground flickering past. Pushes herself forward, tries a swoop down, then pulls herself up and with a wrench brings herself to a dead stop in the air. Gritting teeth, gasping, then laughing.

She hovers now in front of him, holding her balance like a tightrope walker. His gaze takes her in, his eyes shining, staring at what hes done no, at what shes done. Then moving from her to the stars beyond. I wish that I could be the sky, with all those eyes to look at you … She sweeps down upon him and gathers him up. Whirling him

into the

dance. But she feels him freeze, his arms and legs locked against her, like trying to move with a tree trunk. She meets his eyes, and slows to a stop in the air.

Put me down? Please? Now?

Gently she lowers him, not letting her own feet touch the ground, afraid theyll never leave again. She hangs in front of him, struggling.

Why?

He just shakes his head, his face still tight and twisted. He looks away, past her again, to the sky. Waves a hand. Its all yours. Yours alone.

But …

Go on. Explore it. Ill still be here. Just dont go too high.

Too close to the sun?

He shakes his head, a hollow smile. No, you wont burn up there. Its cold.

Theres a lot of cold between you and the sun. And so much loneliness you wont even have air for company.

She wants to stay, to ask more, but the currents are already buoying her upwards. She shifts her balance, feels her legs sweeping upwards behind, hovering prone. His face is just below her, just out of reach of hers. But hes looking at her again as she raises her head, begins to sail forward and up. Up into the dark.

She hears him call quietly after her. And when you come back, Ill teach you to fight.

At the docks, of course, the liveried soldiers who guarded the shipment of supplies to Kaménai refused to let this foreigner on board. His profile was all wrong, his sunless skin and not-even-shoulder-length hair marking him out as dangerous. He declared he was a noble of a northern tribe; they indicated that a noble from outside the empire was in their esteemed opinion a contradiction in terms. He told them there was a catastrophe coming; they sniggered and said they had guessed as much. He told them he had detailed information; they looked him over and said to aid his memory theyd be glad to

provide him with a set of leg-irons and a hot poker or two. He departed with offended dignity and his exotic clothes barely intact.

So, instead, at a shop he traded a silver ring for a simple knee-length skirt and a bronze belt, grimed his face and his hands, and before Alcestiss eyes pulled himself down half a dozen social classes into a pitch-scented sailor. She couldnt be sure whether he was putting a skin on, or taking one off.

She said her goodbyes to him again at the docks, then watched him inveigle himself into the crew of the boat, send one of the hands away on an errand. He passed under the watchful eyes of those same guards as they counted the crew, and she saw him disappearing into the mass of rowers as they pulled away.

She waited for him, despite the city itching at her to leave; she knew hed be dragged back on the return boat, but somehow didnt quite want to be so sure. When the boat pulled up to the dock a couple of hours later, and she saw no figure being hauled off in manacles, for a moment she felt the world spin in a new direction.

Then she saw him still by his seat at the oars, glowering in the sun, and the ground sank back to normal.

On the shores of Kaménai, the same soldiers who had defended the loyal Theran sailors against foreign threats now guarded the island against the loyal Theran sailors.

Having taken a sailors place, he was denied the opportunity to slip out of it and into the palace. After grousing to Alcestis about it, and accepting her offer of dinner and a floor to stay on, before she had quite realised she was making it, he was already turning undaunted to tomorrows plans possibly involving forged papers, or shipping himself inside a barrel, or perhaps the use of a giant catapult.

Then the sixth demon came, and all their plans changed.

Now he starts each day in the shape of a dockhand, rising while she still sleeps to start unloading the cargoes from Heraklion and Phaistos and distant Illium. She takes a few moments from her stall in the marketplace to meet him, watch him mending a sail with experienced hands or sealing a fishing-boats leaking hull with pitch, eyes narrowed against the sun. He moves now with an easy artlessness, a labourers grace that speaks of long days working away from shore. For his nautical lore and a few of his hours, he gains a meal and as much local knowledge as his head can carry.

By midday he reinvents himself as a wandering poet, with a change of robes and a borrowed lyre. His hair loose and his body smooth, he takes up a place in the corner of the market near Alcestiss stall and entertains the public. Now every movement is polished, every syllable precise, with a confidence beyond pretending. His oddly muscled, far from ideal body still somehow summons up gods perfect in grace and form, stories with sense and clarity far beyond everyday life. Each ode is finely crafted, impeccably performed without breaking a sweat, wringing the listeners feelings without giving away any of what emotions of his own may lie beneath.

(I play the liar very well, he whispers to Alcestis after one such session, and once again she senses a joke that has failed to translate.) Rather than tales of familiar princes, he produces his own stories of distant inventors whose imagination brings triumph or tragedy, sailors returning to find their homes changed beyond recognition by time. (Formulae and borrowings, he confides to Alcestis, except for the bits that are true.) The children are especially taken with his odd songs from faraway lands, singing along with his tale of a magical yellow ship which sails beneath the waves, their eyes wide enough to see him as its captain.

After noon he retreats with Alcestis to her home: the former priestess is now a studious potter, her cramped ground-floor rooms doubling as a workshop. With his help, firing one set of pots in the kiln out the back while she works at the wheel, the days work is completed in half the time. He colours her spirals and rosettes on ewers and jars, but never creates a design of his own saying that his talents lie elsewhere.

And then, in the remaining daylight, he teaches her, and she flies.

From high above, the wind she sees the scars through Akrotiri: the straight furrow through the houses of the harbour area, the bare rock where the northern districts villas had been scoured away, the winding erasures where the next four demons rampaged. Her city looks punctured, clawed.

She feels around inside herself for grief, or horror, or rage at the sight. But all she can feel is the dulled tension in her muscles as she holds herself in place

neither moving nor at rest. It could be the effort of flying, but no, on the ground she feels the same. Even in absence nothing is eased.

The currents buoy her higher, the wounds of the city dwindling away.

The waves below her seem to drag their heels, as the slowed-down world flickers past. Now she can see all the way across the island of Thera Akrotiri spread across its outer slopes, the sharp cliffs along the inner curve. From here the island forms a vast crescent, its far end lost in the distance.

Higher still, farther back, and she can see the whole, so many miles across: Thera a three-quarter-ring, and the pointed mound of Kaménai within the encircled sea. Even up here theres a hint of smoky haze over the crater in the centre of the royal island. Its a wonder, she tells herself; not even the King can see his lands the way she can. Why isnt that wonder filling the hollows of her bones?

In the shapes of the islands she can see the story the Doctor told her: that once there had been just one island, a single mountain grown around the volcano, towering above, the sea. Then hundreds of thousands of years ago, the mountain had exploded

gouging out those cliffs, showering a thousand miles with boulders, turning the sky black for days and vermilion at sunset for years. The mountain had left a basin for the sea to rush in, drowning the volcano, but its fire was so hot it turned the water above, to air. Only after several eternities had the volcano brought forth enough earth from its fire to reach above, the water again, and set about growing a new island in the centre of the old one.

The next eruption will be the stuff of legends, the Doctor said. But even legends are dwarfed by the stories no one was around to tell.

Youll get nothing out of that one, Pelopia tells her, her face crinkling with the knowledge of the old and long-suffering. Believe you me. His type sets off soon as theyve had their fill.

You think so?

The stories I could tell you.

As indeed you have.

Theyre watching him in the marketplace from their stalls, Pelopias carefully-woven linen beside Alcestiss earthen pottery. His lyre set aside for the moment, hes entertaining a small child with a silver piece, making it appear and disappear and jump from hand to hand.

Hes a charmer all right. But shiftless. Youll never get an honest days work out of him.

Ive got several.

O-ho …

Alcestis laughs. Real work. Though never a whole day at once, Ill admit.

Pelopia turns back to watch him appreciatively. Alcestis can see her smiling with one side of her face and scowling with the other. Hes flighty, that one. What you need is someone with both feet on the ground.

Alcestis says nothing, her eyes on the captivated child. Watching the Doctors fingers at work, effortlessly deceiving.

Her memories of the first attack were of Pelopia leaning on her in the rubble, wailing. From the moment they heard the first lamentations, Pelopia was lost.

Doubling over, her free hand uselessly wringing support from empty air. All Alcestis could do was hold them both upright, as they tried vainly to sift the remains of the family Coresus from the powdered mortar that had held their home together.

She didnt cry, even then. She shook, quivered, moaned even, but felt no release. She busied herself with the search for anything still solid in the wreckage, picking out Iphianassas scattered beads from the grit and the dust-clouds while the girl-child howled for her parents.

The demon had cut a diagonal gash through half the streets of the western town. The mortar of the stones had cracked and crumbled at its touch, mud-bricks scattering like marbles as it charged. Wood had rotted, fruit shrivelled past putrefaction. Even the grass under its hooves had been scorched away to nothing. Oxylus, the swan-necked youth, had been the last to flee. Not because he had been brave, he said as he wept, rather because he had been slow to run. The demon had touched him for just a moment: the left side of the young mans face was wizened; his left arm, bones in a bag of skin.

Anaxibia worked right alongside them, clutching her gown together the rich wife, who had her glassware stall in the market not to sell, but to be seen to sell. She had never had any time for them, but today she took the stones Pelopia handed her, sat with Alcestis at the side when exhausted, gave Oxylus some water as he quaked.

And when news came through of the second demon, which had just

erased the villas above the harbour, she was the one who gave voice to the unimaginable, as the same thought crept over all of them: that this disaster had been arranged.

There was no certainty, no clarity as they huddled together in the tavern. Some said it was the work of wizards, or inventors. Most just wondered how Rhea Herself could ever have allowed this to come to pass. Some stood among the workers proclaiming that this was in fact the will of the Fallen; that from Tartarus, the deposed Titans now condemned their irreverent, impious culture. Alcestis had heard these men preach before theyd tried to recruit her to their numbers once, when theyd learned about her time in the temple and in the past, when she had weighed the self-absorbed gabblings of the town against the crystalline clarity of the Titans touch, shed been unable to help feeling a hint of truth in what they said. But that night, as the lay preachers thundered in their righteous pleasure at the sufferers, she felt nothing but disgust at them.

There was no certainty, no clarity as they huddled together in the tavern. In the end, Alcestis had Iphianassa sleep on her floor that night the girl had no other place to go, and on that night, neither of them wanted to be by themselves.

Her memories of the third attack were just of the runners shouting the news, the slow paralysis spreading up her body as she sank onto an upturned storage jar in the back of her stall. They had come again, could come again and everyone would still be at their mercy. The echoing hollow in her head filled with the words it does not end.

For the fourth attack, again she hurried to the site, to the path this demon had clawed through the upper slopes. But this time the clean-up crews were slaves supervised by palace soldiers, and people from the high-side carefully stepped around the rubble as they went on their way. Only children watched, staring at the soldiers as though they were gryphons. They were rare and gaudy birds, in a town where war was something that happened in stories from other places.

She saw laughing Iphianassa, silent now, her head down in case she saw judgement in a pair of watching eyes. She saw soldiers at the tavern at the tavern! with official advice to report strangers, anyone who might be a wizard, everyone staring at them and each other, clutching their cups. She saw Anaxibia pass her by, on her way to her undamaged house, boasting about the compensation her husband had sweet-talked from the King for loss of trade.

She felt a scream wedged in the bottom of her lungs, with no breath to force it out.

The urge to shake each of them by the shoulders, force them to notice anything, everything. Finally, the slow, numbing realisation that only the best parts of the world had changed, that no one saw any reason to try to change the worst. Her own feelings ground down to a clod of earth.

Of the sixth attack, all she remembers are fragments: The ball of fire that struck like a stone from the sky, somewhere behind the roofs of the market, shaking the ground. No, the moment before that, when the ground of the marketplace shook, and the Doctor looked up at the sound of screams.

No, the moment before that, when she tugged on the Doctors elbow, wanting to get out of the marketplace as though the ground was burning her feet, the itchy, restless feeling of the day reaching a peak.

She remembers seeing the broad, massive animal head within the fire, and not quite grasping that it was happening again, right in front of her.

She remembers how the fiery bull tossed and kicked the drinkers and the jars of drink in the beer shop. How the place stank of ashy mould for a week afterwards.

A heavy man kicking a child out of his way, as the crowd surged in every direction.

Elbows and shoulders striking her, but her feet chained to the ground, no way to make herself move.

And the heart-stopping moment when the Doctor waved his arms and ran towards the bull.

The monster turned, the Doctor darted again, away from its head, once more to the side. Once more the bull, turning. His feints and stumbles, half bullfighter and half clown, leading the bull, like a bird miming a broken wing.

It wasnt until much later, thinking back over and over those fragments, that she understood the moment before he ran. The look on his face as he stood beside her. The Doctor had decided what to do. It was not panic and it was not desperation. He could dodge the bull, keep it turning in circles. But not for long.

That was the moment when she hefted a poncho from Pelopias stall and hurled it at the demon. The heavy cape unfurled as it sailed through the air and snagged the bulls horns, settling for a moment over its face, long enough for the Doctor to dash away before the monsters heavy shoulder could slam across him.

The cloth burned, tangling on the bulls horns in puffs of grey and red. Then it was gone. Only moments later, its fire spent at last, the bull was gone as well.

She remembers the slow realisation: she had known which way the monster would leap, she had known which way the Doctor would move in his dance of distraction, the dance that kept the bull busy until its fires went out.

And the moment when he asked her to do the same.

Why me?

Because you can feel it.

They sat halfway up the cliff, on the edge of the track to the high part of the island, as the coal-red sun died on the horizon. Below them the port stood huddled against the slope, squeezed there by the ocean, waves battering it against the cliffs. In the tiny marketplace she could just see the fires lit by the soldiers, as they continued to search through the rubble for anything to salvage.

Why dont you just go? she murmurs. Find your way to Kaménai. Maybe even swim there.

Ive thought about that, he answers seriously. But I dont want to go there now.

Not yet. This is more important.

I didnt even want to be in the city today … I knew it was coming again. Somehow.

You knew which way the wind was blowing.

She sat there shaking in the chill. The Doctor had lent her his strange lush garment, but the cold was already inside her. Now he took her face between his hands and aimed her eyes at his: his face gentle and firm and quite quite mad.

The currents that these beasts ride on, you can feel them too. Given a little training, you can anticipate their moves. Even learn to ride the currents yourself.

The cape, floating impossibly slowly through the air. The cape, settling on the bulls horns, melting to dust and ash.

You took such a chance down there …

Its what I do, I take chances. I also give them.

She looked down at the marketplace again. The soldiers had told them all to go about their business, leave the clean-up to the new experts. There was nothing for them to do. Even the Doctors offer was probably nothing, but it would be nice if there was any sort of something to be had.

Why me? she asked one last, time.

Because you werent afraid to look at me.

Now she stands in the sun-baked paddock, one eye on the Doctor and the other on the bull. The latter is farther away, but shes not sure which she expects to run amok first.

The gods only know what story the Doctor told this farmer to allow them to use his distant fields for her practice probably one involving plenty of nudging and leering. Getting into the bulls paddock for today probably required an even stranger tale. But now she faces it, under the distant olive tree, its head low in the grass and horns rising like snakes about to strike. Its smaller than the demon. Its bigger and blacker than a thundering sky.

The wind hasnt changed yet, he hasnt scented us. You dont have to try it today.

I said I would.

Hes quiet and serious, but she cant shake the sense that hes still probing, challenging, even mocking. Youre sure? Remember, if you confront it with imperfect courage, it will annihilate your soul. Or something like that. At the very least itll put a whacking great hole through you.

The ones who do this in the temple … It takes months of training.

You know how the currents change. Weve got only weeks before the wind is strong enough for the next attack. Anyway, youve got a gift that those people dont have. A tremendous gift.

They have discipline.

Oh, I think a little discipline goes a long, long way.

But isnt that what a master of these sorts of arts is supposed to teach you?

Yes, and if you dont watch it, theyll discipline every last bit of spark and imagination right out of you. Ever see that at the temple?

Hes smiling, but she can see old wounds in his eyes. She remembers Britomartis with the acolytes in the sanctuary, smacking her out of a tingling spiritual reverie to criticise her posture, and nods slowly. She wonders what such incident he remembers.

Now, if you can get by on raw talent and plenty of enthusiasm … Well, look at me.

That made me the perennial disappointment to my betters I am today.

All right, then.

Ready?

Deep breath. Ready.

Before she can think again, he whistles, cracking the stillness. Oi! Hamburger! Over here!

The bull starts. She can hear the snuffling from here. The Doctors waving his arms, crying Thats it! Come and have a go!

And its thundering towards her, all that bulk and muscle and force concentrated down to two sharp points.

She runs, runs towards it, praying with every muscle. Feeling for the currents, letting them lift her with every stride, the world beginning to shake as she pounds ahead.

And leaps.

Blast of hot breath, hands full of bone, the ground somersaulting over her and the thunder passing under the top of her head. Her legs kick

the sky. She lets go, and the world whips round free of her.

She lands dizzied on one knee, but the fear keeps her moving turns around, to see the bull tossing its head and turning for another charge. Again she runs, the world around her moving just that crucial bit more slowly. This time she dodges round it and vaults over its flank, the currents lifting her from a handspring into open air.

Again and again, catching the rhythm of its bewildered belligerence, matching it time and again with unexpected grace. Finding the ease.

The Doctor, having legged it, applauds from the far side of the fence.

After the session he presents her with a fine linen towel, worthy of a villa, and she dries herself as they sit on the edge of the Kaménai cliffs. You never told me why you left, he murmurs. Left? The temple, on Kaménai. You never told me where youre from. Or why you left, and started travelling.

He shrugs, a movement that looks like hes ducking. Well its like asking a fish, isnt it? If he bothered to answer, he wouldnt say, oh I was hatched on that rock, hed just say he was from the ocean. In which case, he hasnt left. But you have left the temple.

Yes.

He sees, speaks gently now. You must have been there for years.

I went

there as a girl. Left when I was old.

Youre not old.

I was when they finished

with me.

So did you jump, or were you pushed?

Stories differ.

He nods,

slowly. They always do.

She wants to ask him in turn, but she feels herself resisting on his behalf a door she would hold shut if pried open in herself. He meets her eyes, tells her Im so sorry, and then all she needs to do

is sit there and breathe with him. A pause; she can see him weighing his words before asking anything more.

His words come quietly. Do you still let yourself remember what grace was like, before you fell from it?

The air whispers out of her. Somehow he feels what she does. She wants to hold on to him to keep herself from floating away.

She picks through the memories, finds the precious stones among them, which she wouldnt have looked for on her own. Its easy now to offer them to him.

I remember … certainty. Knowing that there were gods who could hear your voice at every moment. Knowing that you could do what was right, and it would matter, even if only to them.

Certainty, he says, his eyes closing for a moment. Yes. It would be nice.

Now, at last, her own question can come. So where did you fall from? Theres a wisp of a smile now, just landing on his face. He points, carefully, between two clouds.

See that, up there?

No. Well pretend you can. That little dot up there, that tiny blue spot against the blue … thats my ship. Thats where its moored. A ship?

His smile spreads, shyly. Well, of sorts. Like you said, Im a traveller. I can go anywhere in this world. Or other worlds. Or even other times. Anywhere.

Anywhere? Including up there?

Well, evidently.

So you can fly.

Her smile freezes as she sees the scowl flicker across his features. Its there for only a second, but its enough to send the moment crashing.

Well, he says, Only in the sense that a ship can swim.

He stands, suddenly loose-limbed and defiantly casual, and flings an arm about the countryside. Look at all that. So idyllic, so pastoral. Youd never guess that all of this is in the middle of such rough waters. I dont usually land like that, up there, its just that that was as close as my ship would allow me to get.

To what? she asks, but shes already realising the answer. To the currents?

He nods. Theyre a whirlpool, a typhoon, centred right on the royal island. In these dimensions, youre only just catching the edges of it. But to my ship, its a maelstrom I fought with her for ages, but she wouldnt come far enough into it to land. I had to improvise.

So you knew it was bad here, she says. Why would you sail into a hurricane like that?

He shrugs. To sort it out, he says, and the look on his face makes her forget to breathe. Even more so because its so casual.

Then hes off again, spiralling and gesturing, not letting himself settle. I thought this would be so simple. Ive got friends, waiting, I cant get back to them till this is all over. I thought Id just drop in, put out a few fires, then whistle to my ship and have her finish the course shed started on, come to pick me up. But no.

Instead, I cant even get to the island at the centre of it. Instead, Im barely even getting started. Instead, Im …

Not flying?

Now, its his turn to freeze. The distracted, distracting energy runs down. She goes to him, but he sits down on the cliff edge, hanging his legs over nothing. She settles beside him.

My ship can fly, he says, barely more than a whisper. And she knows better than I do where Im going. I just hold on for dear life.

Im sorry.

His face has hardened. His eyes are looking out to sea, searching out unreachable islands. Finally they turn, come to rest on her, pointedly.

My journeys are not my own. Just what I do when I get there.

That night, she flies alone again, going high enough to lose the light of

the soldiers fires. She hovers in the wind, lets it play over her, in sky so moonless that it makes no difference whether her eyes are open or closed. Hoping that somehow paring it all away will make it make sense.

That first night, after the attack, shed walked back into the city with him under cover of darkness. Back then shed still thought he might be a source of answers, rather than new questions.

If someone just wanted to humble us, why do it like this? Why send a divine bull? Is that what you see? What do you mean? When you look at the demon, what does it look like to you? A bull, a flaming bull Dont summarise.

Describe. What is it? A huge animal. Pounding. Uncontrolled. Topples buildings.

Go on…

Awe, fear, a force of the gods. Fire, burns everything it touches.

Turns people to dust. Everything crumbles. Yes … So what is it? Dont you know? I know its a bull. No. Its time. …? A small burst of animated time, given just enough consciousness to

be directed. In the form of a bull?

Thats the face you put on a natural force in pure concentrated form … a ripple of age and rot and decay and dust. All the forces of the world bound up together. An earthquake on legs. Seasons battering you in a second.

So they are gods.

If thats your definition. You see them as gods, you know your gods

take the form of the bull, so you see a bull.

But why do I see them afire?

Is

there another element thats better suited for time? Earth is always earth. A wind blows you, another can blow you back. The rain drenches you, youll

dry out again. A fire burns you … you stay burned. Times arrow is afire, it burns

us all.

So how do we fight time?

We dont.

(And here he had turned to her, with a grin

that had made her want to

run for cover.) We bluff it.

She moves now in slow motion, miming punches and kicks to precise spots an inch in front of his face. Her new muscles are held taut, keeping her exactly two inches from the ground.

So what is it that brings the demons here? she asks him.

Someone summons them. Theyre spawned from the same energy source that produces the currents in time … natural time, but distorted, bent by something powerful.

Something on Kaménai.

Thats the centre of it, yes.

Is that why I can sense the currents? Because I spent so long living right there?

Could be, could be.

So someone else from over there could do this as well?

He nods, saying Go on.

She thinks about it. She cant say anything. She feels the pebbles brush the underside of her feet and concentrates all her thoughts on lifting herself, steadying herself, not letting the gnawing thought drag her downwards into darkness. She holds herself tight and tense.

How could they? she whispers. Who could unleash something like that?

Either someone who doesnt know what hes dealing with …

Or?

Someone who does.

The trick is, he tells her, its got to see your attacks, so itll react to them. But if it can tell youre pulling your punches, itll work out that you cant really hurt it. Make it think its managing to duck your blows flattery will get you everywhere. Thatll keep its attention. You need only to keep it busy for a few minutes … waves break, winds fade, fires burn out.

And you? Duck, dodge, misdirect. The best way not to get hurt in a fight is not to be where the blows land. Tae Kwon Doc: the art of running away while you fight. And find your weapons where you can. They wont last, for long.

She notices that he applies the same driven energy to sleeping as to his waking work racing through a nights rest in half an hour or less. He seems refreshed enough, though she wonders if he hurries through the night to keep the dreams from taking root.

One midnight, half awake, she hears the creak of the door. She rises and follows him, making no sound. From behind and far above, she watches him, a tiny figure prowling through the narrow streets of the Akrotiri labyrinth. She wills herself to be as unnoticeable as possible: a wisp on the wind, a stray bit of moonlight.

When he reaches the beach, he discards his clothes behind a rock, then disappears into the murmuring waves. He swims straight away from the island, chopping a hard rhythm through the water, while she wheels slowly above. The wind is faint, just making her skin tingle. The moonlight is barely enough to pick out his pale form under the skin of the water. On and on, till shes lost all sense of time, and the island behind has disappeared in the darkness. Even the horizon has been lost, the black sea blending seamlessly into the black sky.

Finally he stops, in the centre of the ocean. It becomes the centre because of his presence, with the uniform surface stretching equally in all directions. She watches him tread water, catch his breath then roll onto his back and float. Instinctively she rears away in the sky, but he gives no sign of having seen her. Slowly she lowers herself, close

enough to study his face: eyes gently closed, mouth slightly open, an unfamiliar look of peace.

He has stopped. She hangs there, watching him, but he doesnt move, his moment of joy stretching onward. Retreats into the sky, sees how small he is at last. The currents buoy her upwards; he recedes even further, a glimpse of white surrounded by depths in all directions. Again she watches, the water lapping against him, until she too begins to lose the centre, lose herself. All that remains is her grip on the currents supporting her, like the instinct of her breath.

Finally with a jolt of waking she realises hes rolled in the water and started the long swim back. She shadows him home, keeping watch over him, even as she knows he doesnt need it. Once hes safely emerged onto the beach she sweeps on ahead, hurrying into her house and taking her place in her bed, so hell never have to know hes been seen.

She laughs now, flitting side to side, dodging each blow the Doctor throws at her. He grins as their dance zigzags through the scrubland. Hair flying, he swings again, and she pulls back and upwards. She knows in her blood exactly how to move.

Yes, youve got it. Keep moving, keep him interested. One step ahead. Float like a butterfly, duck like a … duck.

She throws her own punch, leaning into it with the full force of the wind behind her.

It sweeps just past his head, right where she wanted it. Duck and twist, pike her legs to pull them clear, whip round to face him again. The rhythm is thrilling.

Good, good. Not good enough.

Not good enough?

You look like youre playing. Youve got to convince this thing youre a threat to it. That if you ever did touch it you could kill it, as easily as it could kill you.

Youve got to make it see your determination. Feel your anger.

Im not an actress.

It wont be acting.

He jabs again. Her hand leaps up to block it. She flinches; if this were the demon, she would just have lost the arm.

Look at me. Im the thing that tore your city to pieces. You want to kill me. Youre enraged.

She hesitates, he sees it. Shes breathing a bit too hard, the anger caught in her throat.

Dont fight it. Repression leads to numbness, numbness leads to apathy, apathy leads to narrowness, narrowness leads to constipation and all sorts of problems.

They say angers a two-edged sword.

Well, of course its a two-edged sword how many good swords do you know with only one edge? That would just be a butter knife with a long handle, really.

All these years … theyve told me …

Oh, yes, be a good little girl, dont make a mess in the temple. Dont shout too loud, you might wake something.

A sudden rain of blows. Duck, twist, retreat a jolt, a sting across her chin she shakes her head in shock. Her legs kick uselessly in the air. She hadnt leapt back far enough. He wasnt pulling his punches, just relying on her skill to make him miss. Gasping for balance, she stares at him.

He wont let up. She twitches, flinches away by reflex, but he keeps pushing. Go on.

Feel it. Wield it. Youve got to learn to handle both edges.

Nisus. Neleus. Oxylus and Anaxibia and all the silent gods. Those who sent the demons and those who used them to their advantage. Those who unleashed horrors, those who rode on their backs, those who stood by and let it happen …

Her hand crashes down.

Now, he flinches, blindsided. His last, punch flickers towards her, but shes already diving, wheeling around so the roll sets up a sharp thrust of her legs. The jab stops his advance just short of her heels.

Yes. Thats it …

Horizontal in the air for a moment. She jack-knifes, getting clear, turns upright to pound the air. He dodges she sees just how hes dodging she could lead him right into her next punch if she wanted. The fire rages in her chest, but she owns it

lets out just enough to power each controlled blow.

Though I suppose there are scimitars and suchlike with only one edge. But if you really wanted a one-edged sword, how about one like a möbius strip? Now, that would be twisted. Imagine fighting with one of those

Youre playing, she growls.

Well, yes, any chance I get

He shuts up as her beaded bracelet catches his nose. Off-balance now, he backs away, bobbing and weaving. Tries to smile encouragingly, but her own smile of triumph is louder.

Suddenly hes down, his back in the scree at the foot of the slope. Lost footing.

With a final leap, she descends upon him, hands to his throat.

Stops there, crouching across him, every muscle thrumming. His eyes are unguarded.

The mockery is silenced, the pride now a gift to her. Shes ready to choke him, to kiss him, to throw back her head and howl.

Hold on to that, he murmurs. Its as much a part of you as the currents are. Laugh, cry, scream, whatever it takes to get you through the day.

Her legs, trembling. She climbs off him, stumbles a step away. Arches her back, chest to the sky, driving out a cry that pulls from far deeper than the bottom of her lungs. Feeling each drop of sweat on her bare ribs, head thrown back, the tears now running sideways across her cheeks.

Its all right, he tells her, but she already knows.

Finally she straightens herself, the exhilaration settling into a hard, warm coal inside her. As she walks to him, offers him a hand, her heels dont quite touch the ground. She cant tell whether its the current lifting her, or just the way she moves now.

We can beat these things.

The words sound odd in her mouth, but less odd than she thought they would. He nods, the playfulness scraped off his face. Oh, yes. Well destroy them. And well find who sent them, and bring them crashing down.

Youve never even sounded angry about it.

Well, of course not. (His eyes vanish behind another smile.) You just keep the sword sheathed, thats all.

Finally, one day she feels it. She steps off the cliff and waits, feeling the wind.

Kaménai sits below her, its peak miles away and two hundred feet down. She watches the breath of smoke from the volcano, lets it pass through her.

Its coming, she says quietly. Maybe even tomorrow morning.

Well, then. He offers her his hand with courtly grace, and she steps gently back onto the ground. Perhaps wed better get it finished.

She works late into the night, losing herself in the tactile ease of moulding soft clay. Finishing the last, of her outstanding orders. If she burns tomorrow, she wont have let any of her customers down. Rapt in her work, moving from potters wheel to painting-table to kiln, only at the end does she realise that her feet have never quite touched the ground throughout.

Hold still.

Hes draping delicate fabric over her skin. The remains of his rainbow parachute, taken neatly into sections, one colour at a time.

He works on her as she works on the clay, wrapping his chosen clothes around her and pinning the fabric into position. Finally she stands, as his tailors dummy, watching the pots harden and glow in the fire.

I still dont see the point of wearing this.

Camouflage. Confusion. It wont know where to hit you if youre billowing all over the place.

And the loose silk does do a good job of hiding her form, the wide

sleeves spreading like triangular wings. Tapering in at her waist and flaring out to the tailfeathers of her feet. It also looks appallingly easy to trip over, until she convinces him to take up the hem a bit.

Id feel more comfortable fighting in this, she says.

She indicates her own garment underneath as he peels the top layer away: soft woven linen, short sleeves, the open bodice presenting her kohléd highlights with careful dignity, the layered skirts with their pinched waist. The ceremonial style, a relic of the temple, which she had unearthed just for this occasion.

Oh, heavens no, thats probably the worst thing to fight in you could imagine.

Limiting your breathing, constraining your legs, and at the same time exposing the bits that you most want to protect.

His hand rests for a moment on top of her left breast, pressing in to indicate her heart. Its almost as ridiculous as fighting in a chainmail bikini.

Even so, the thought chafes at her: the ceremonial clothing comes from her life, the priestesss silhouette is familiar to her. But she wont recognise this shape he wants to unleash into the sky. The shape shes been letting herself be moulded into.

So you really think its a good idea for me to wear vast swirls of fabric near a flame creature?

Oh, thats the beauty of it. This stuffs also a little bit fire-retardant. For this kind of fire, at least. Here.

He wraps scraps of the fabric around her hands, bandaging her palms.

It wont be enough to save you from a full attack, but you might get away with a glancing blow. Now, the final touch …

He takes a remaining strip of white silk, and wraps it around her forehead like a scarf, binding her long braids. The end of the fabric trails away over her shoulder.

Then he slows and stops a moment to consider her. His eyes are years away.

I didnt mean for you to look like an angel.

A what?

He doesnt elaborate. Instead he continues undressing her, marking and unpinning each piece of the fabric. Then he sits against the back wall, stitching with the ease of a practised sailmaker, his face half-lit with all the flattery that flickering light bestows on a lovers body. His hands look slightly outsized, she notices: like they belong to an even bigger man trapped in a normal-sized body. It makes the deftness with which he handles the tiny sewing-needles all the more surprising.

So even he is surprised by the new shape hes given her. Oddly, this reassures her: he may be turning her into something she doesnt recognise, but the new faces come from somewhere inside her, beyond his reach. Before he came, she would never have recognised the currents flowing through her, and now theyre as much a part of her as her breath. So she surrenders this last, point to him; perhaps these coloured silks too will become her.

She stares into the kiln and watches the new colours harden into the pots.

Let me take you up tonight.

He shakes his head, tries to brush it off again, but she can feel how few hours remain.

Youve given me this gift, this is the least I can give back.

Oh, thats just it. Its the least.

He tries to turn blithely away. But the house is too small and cramped for him to avoid her, the atmosphere from the kiln too hot and sweaty for the tension to release.

You cant be afraid …

Afraid? No. Infuriated.

The words not aimed at her, she tells herself. His eyes were turning inward again.

But with nothing else to do, suddenly the argument is the most important thing in the world, and she cant stop her own words.

Because youd just be a passenger? You dont like being out of control?

No, its more than that.

Then what?

She swoops in on him, corners him near her bed. If nothing else makes sense tonight, she swears this will.

Because I cant go there.

Why not?

Its not my choice, I cant. It wont let me in.

What does that mean?

Just listen! Listen …

His fingers pick up the tortoiseshell lyre, discarded by the bed, and flick across the strings. Without even looking, he sets up a frantic, jittery rhythm on the two lowest strings his face impassive, his hands agitated. She stands, frozen.

I can play notes, he says. As many as you like. Ive got enough skill, enough enthusiasm, to make it sound convincing. But I dont feel the music. I cant.

A final flurry of notes, and he pulls his hand away. The phrase dies unresolved.

I know the beautys there. I can feel it from the outside. A virtuoso human can play and make me cheer, sob, dance, anything. Overwhelm me with it.

Its something big enough to lose yourself in, she says quietly. Like the sea. Or the sky.

He nods, a ghost of a smile. But it wont let me in.

He sinks onto the bed, all the nervous energy suddenly drained. Her own frustration suddenly seems horribly rootless, about to blow away. He fumbles for words. I want to join in the dance. But when the best I can manage is my own limping flightless

theatrics … But you guided me in, she says uncomprehendingly. You taught me. I knew the currents had to be there. I could give you a digital description. But I could never feel them myself, not in a million years. Its like shes falling now, without having taken flight. The ground has

just drifted away from under her feet.

All the times you described how they felt …

He grins faintly. Yes. Well. Glad you bought it.

But they were there, she tells him. More firmly, then. They were real.

Oh they are. But not to me. Youve got the instincts … youve done better than my wildest dreams. But if you take me up there, youre not giving me a gift, youre showing me something I can never have.

And all she could do was meet his gaze and gently touch his cheek, not knowing whether that would help either.

Alcestis meets the bull halfway.

Before she sees the fingers pointing at the sky, before she hears someone shriek, shes darting out from her house, trailing silk, one hand closed around the shaft of a light javelin.

Above, a low bank of cloud has become a miniature dawn, lit from inside by orange firelight. The crowds are frozen, staring high.

The ground drops away from her. Theres no sensation of effort, of pushing away.

Shes floating up towards the light too bright to look at now the silk billowing softly around her. Already the wind is blanking out the cries of the crowd below.

Alcestis gathers speed. Her thoughts are trailing behind her bodys automatic response: can she prevent the demon from reaching the ground at all? What would the Doctor think of that?

First, she has to show the creature she means business.

The bull breaks through the clouds with a roar like dry thunder. Its face is huge, the features sketched in burning orange against a smouldering red and black shape.

The body is a wall behind the head, a mass of charred meat that tapers like the body of a leech. The legs seem to stretch and fade down to points, to nothing.

It faces her, snorting plumes of volcanic ash and steam. The wind picks them up and sends them whirling to her. The monsters breath

stinks of volcano.

Theyre both slowing, reaching the same height. Alcestis is in a world of air, sky, clouds; she doesnt dare look down at the ground, not yet. She lets herself drift, making sure the sun is not behind the bull, not behind her. It needs to have a clear view of her.

The bulls brute face contorts in surprise as Alcestis comes towards it, rushing now, the javelin clutched tight. The wind wants to pry it from her fingers, the same way its whipping the breath out of her mouth.

She knows the bull will not move.

With a roll and a flick she launches the shaft, aiming for a burning eye. Only at the last moment, before the spear strikes it, does it flinch, turning its head.

The javelin drives into the bulls shoulder, disintegrating in the black-red heat as though flung into a run of lava. Even as the javelin crumbles, the bull is bellowing.

It has been struck. It has been hurt. It can be hurt.

It charges, thrusting a face full of rage at her. Alcestis turns and flees.

She plummets, her arms instinctively flying up above, her head to streamline her shape. The garment clings to her instead of flapping upwards over her head; hes thought of everything. As the streets turn beneath her, vertigo arrives, trailing panic. She lets them pass over and through her and concentrates on the map spread out beneath her feet.

She glances up, knowing that the bull will still be high above her it is. Despite all its strength, its danger, its infusion of divine fire, its just like the bull in the field. Stupid, and slow to change direction. The pounding of a bass drum, around which a flute melody can wind.

She allows herself a few seconds to slow before she reaches the ground. The buildings rise up around her, suddenly, and shes running across the dusty ground where a house used to stand, her sandals kicking fine grey powder into the air.

Despite the devastation, shes surrounded by half-walls. They chose this spot because the demons last, dance created a maze of rubble and wreckage. It wont stand up to the bulls ageing touch, but its confusing, distracting.

Not for Alcestis. She has been over this ground a dozen times.

The bull breaks the earth like a boulder dropped over a cliff. Dust explodes upwards, like smoke, obscuring its form. Circling slowly, keeping her back against the standing walls, waiting for it to see her.

Somewhere here, the Doctor is chasing people away from the ruins. His part is to empty the area, break up any watching crowds. Hers is to fill that empty arena with movement and fascination until the bulls fire dies away.

It charges, darting out of the cloud with unexpected suddenness. Alcestis lifts six inches off the ground before she catches herself, forces herself to hold her place.

This time she cant grasp the bulls horns as she springs, flies over it, face up to the sky, her back above, its back and curving down into the trail of dust behind it.

Landing, facing away from it, turning, stumbling, almost losing her footing in the powder, wiping the grit away from her eyes.

Its better than she could have hoped. The bull cant stop or turn before it strikes the wall. It smashes into the stones, then through them, and a moment later the wreckage of the house comes down on it.

At once, the mound of rubble starts to creak and crack, and suddenly fragments into a rain of pieces, sliding down around the angry, struggling figure of the monster. A vision: her own bones like the walls of that house, crumbling down.

The demon hauls itself out with a satisfied grunt and steps daintily down from the sand on its slender legs. Its vanishingly small hooves leave no marks in the dust.

The heat of it dries out her eyeballs in an instant she has to blink, but even a blink feels too long.

It comes for her again. This time Alcestis runs, cutting across the open space of the ruins, across the line of its charge. The bull is forced to swerve: an ugly, grunting manoeuvre.

She runs along a wall, just above, the height of the bulls head. It slams its burning horns into the bricks beneath her. The moments struggle to free itself, before the wall shatters and falls like an unhooked curtain, gives her time to leap over its back and away.

Hot grit beneath the toes of her left foot. Her sandal brushed the bull; its gone. A moment later a sharp pain begins in the sole of her foot, making her draw her leg up, feeling for the burned skin.

There isnt time. The bull staggers at her sideways, trying to turn its bulk. She stumbles backwards, the remaining sandal unbalancing her as she tries to escape that awkward, swinging weight. She catches her heels on a sharp edge of brick and tumbles onto her back in the dust.

The bull lowers its head and snuffles towards her, snorting contentedly. Weight in her limbs. A sharp cold in her marrow. The monster has run her down, and her arms and legs are too tired to drag herself out of its path. This dance is done.

She closes her eyes and falls into the sky. Beneath her, the bull snorts and stamps. Mother Rhea, she prays silently, send the wind to cradle me, to carry me away.

She turns as she rises, until shes facing the maze below her. She can see the people milling about the ruins, a safe margin of clear streets between the crowds and the battlefield. In the centre of the grey, a black spot.

The bull clambers up into the sky after her. Its colour changes, the orange spreading to cover its body, then hot yellow, then white. A moment later there is nothing but a stinking cloud of sulphurous dust, blowing upwards, and after that, the winds clear it away and theres nothing left at all.

She slows, hangs there staring at where it was, blinking the stain from her eyes.

Alcestis makes no effort now. The winds carry her in a gentle swirl, she has no idea for how long. Finally she feels the earth reaching up for her, lets her feet come down to the ground, outside her own house.

The Doctor is there. He takes her arm and takes her inside, helps her out of the clinging garment, holds a cool jug of water to her lips. She tips it right back, flooding her mouth and her burning face, until the dust is clear of her throat and she can speak.

No-one died. He puts down the water while she hangs onto the door frame and screams into the street. This time no-one died! She sags into his arms, laughing.

Not even me.

When morning comes, once the story has spread, she stands, again in the fluttering silk and reaches her arms around the Doctor from behind. Hes in his foreign finery, cool and composed in the heat, but she can see the clouds gathering in his eyes.

She leans over his shoulder, close to his ear, and whispers Just enjoy what you can.

He twists his head to look at her and smiles. Shes never before seen a sun move to hide clouds. Foolish, really. I should be grateful for what Ive got.

And she lifts him gently off the ground. He reaches back and hangs onto her waist as the street drops away. A moment of vertigo as she finds her balance, straining with the unfamiliar weight; eventually she hooks her legs around his, to hold him in place, and tips forward. Carrying him close beneath her as she soars towards the sea.

She feels the tension and resistance in his back, feels it slowly melt away. Her chin rests on his shoulder. As she banks, she lets her hips swing against his, pushing him, trying to pass on to him some of the feel of the dance. At last, she can fly unencumbered by thoughts of what shes flying for.

Below them the town looks no different. The scars still cut through the squared-off blocks of white plaster, the people are no more likely to look towards the horizon.

Down there Neleus is as mean as ever, Anaxibia no more likely to spare a thought. No different. But given how different the landscape could have looked, that itself still feels like a victory.

Small mercies, she hears him murmur, as he tries to match her rhythm.

She grasps him tighter as they begin their descent.

Now, this is the bit Ive been looking forward to all along, he says.

Hes checked that the same soldiers are on duty at the docks that day, just so he can savour their slack-jawed astonishment when the unknown saviour of their city descends upon them. They back away

against the boat, cringing with awe at the sight of her as she settles to the earth. And she unfolds her wings to reveal the insolent foreigner, who grins smugly at them and says Now, about that lift to the palace?

Two: Child

Kaménai: yolk within the white of Thera. Alabaster palace-city gleaming golden under hot, high sun. Harsh, sulphurous rock against the sky-blue ocean, softened by fields and apple orchards on the gentler slopes. And in the midst of the yellow, the blood-spot of the volcano at its heart.

Down now, across the encircled sea towards the gap in the natural battlements of the outer island. Straight up, the cliffs of Thera wall off the sky. Here at the inlet, a galley full of kings-men, sweaty and sullen, stopping the few loyal fishermen and merchant boats still allowed inside. No-one enters this sea without a royal pass stamped in clay and an escort on board. While Akrotiri has been raked by the bulls, Kaménai has remained at peace. Through this the court convince themselves they will keep it so.

Here, Alcestis, proud as a figurehead in the bow of the supply boat. Beside her the Doctor still pale and untouched despite his time in the sun, eyes narrowed as he studies the palace crouched against the mountainside.

Sweep back across the salt-water moat: just above, the docks, a fine trickle of smoke rises from the temple wing, mirroring the volcano above. Every hour of every day, sacrifices are made to Rhea Therasia, long-tressed goddess, for her help in ending the terror. The priestesses queue at the doors of the shrines, clasping honey, flowers, jewellery. Twice each week, another flesh-and-blood bull is offered up, so that the temple wing of the palace has a constant, mouth-watering smell. Even the servants are receiving morsels from the hecatomb. An act of desperation smoothed into routine, a machine for converting hopes and fears into meat and ash.

Children play, acolytes train, goats bleat, kitchen hands haul baskets of barley.

Cats and snakes share an uneasy truce. Councillors whisper for position. Guards check passes, check faces, search rooms and storage

jars. Round and round itself the palace revolves, its fundamental rhythms resurgent and unchallenged. In the face of horror it is anchored firm as the mountain itself in the ocean floor: majestic.

Cor, says Deucalion.

Glaucus sticks his elbow in his older brothers side. Shurrup, well get thrown out.

From their seats beside Fathers throne, Glaucus looks down at the strange lady in her impossibly sharp multicolours. She has the strong limbs of a peasant girl, but the poise of a priestess; her face is veiled with gauzy linen. One braid of her hair falls over her shoulder, its tip singed white by the bulls. Is she a barbarian queen?

Glaucus hopes so.

Cor, says Deucalion again. Glaucus stifles a giggle. Shes certainly worth it and with his thirteenth birthday ceremony fast approaching, he might be expected by Father to start staring in earnest but not when Nauplius the Chief Councillor is making a speech.

The foreign man with her is pale as a fishs belly. Some hermit who lives in a sunless cave? Or perhaps a scholar, who never steps outside his library? His face is a bit like Deucalions, but grown up playful, but not soft, full of unexpected angles of cheek and chin.

Nauplius has stopped speaking. Now, a page is bringing the man and woman forward, where Father can see them. The bull-killer and her mate. The stories of their exploits reached the court at the same time they did; the court has been full of hopeful chatter. Glaucus leans forward.

The man is saying: May it please your majesty for my name to be Perdix, and my profession inventor and craftsman.

Father strokes his well-trimmed beard. His face is marked with lines from frowns and laughter; its the laugh-lines that are in play now. A wandering genius, then?

Struck from the mould of Daedalus?

Perdix smiles. Im aware of his work. I believe he designed the sewer system at your brothers palace at Knossos? And did some fascinating

things with sails …

He looks as though he could ramble on like this for a while, but Father smoothly diverts him. Its your skills with bulls that fascinate me.

Glaucus still cant quite figure out how Father does it interrupting people without it sounding like a kingly command. Its the sort of thing he and Deucalion are expected to learn at these audiences. How Father keeps his reputation as King Rhadamanthys the judge, the settler of disputes: letting everyone feel they are listened to, even as he controls the conversation.

Well, your majesty, says Perdix, Im afraid Im only a sort of executive management consultant in that area. The woman at my side is the one whos been fighting them

Im sure youve heard all about it and Im here to offer our services. I can help discover why theyre attacking, and how to stop them.

Rhadamanthys is serious now. And this woman is?

Beneath her veil, the barbarian queen seems about to address him, but before she can speak, the High Priestess Britomartis steps forward. That, if it please your majesty, is Alcestis, whom I had removed from the priesthood.

Theres a moment where no-one moves or speaks, and then the barbarian queen tears away her veil, to reveal the face of a Minoan noblewoman. Glaucus would be disappointed, but fire is flashing in the womans eyes as she turns to Britomartis: they could be in for a catfight.

Before it happens, Perdix the inventor darts in between the two ladies. High Priestess! Its an honour to meet you. Alcestis has told me so much. Apparently theres nothing you like better than a good posture.

Glaucus and Deucalion are both staring now at the former acolyte. Glaucus thinks he remembers her from ceremonies at the palace temple. When did he stop seeing her? One day she just wasnt there any more. It often happens that way.

Why did you expel her? the King wants to know. What was her crime?

Britomartis admits: There was no crime. She could not maintain the necessary standards. I convinced her that it was not her vocation.

She seems to have found her vocation now, says Rhadamanthys mildly. Tell me, Perdix: can you teach others what youve taught Alcestis? Can you make me more fliers?

Perdix says carefully: It might not be possible; the talent is rare. But since you wish it, your majesty, Ill certainly try.

The King nods. Nauplius will arrange it. Now, Britomartis: I put the girl into your hands. See that shes given good quarters. Perdix, you will come with me. My sons also.

Everyone rises; when the King leaves, the audience is at an end. For a moment, the woman takes Perdixs hand, as if afraid to go by herself. But he nods at her, and she follows Britomartis out of the council chamber, her back straight and her head held high.

Glaucus realises that Perdix has caught him staring. Before he can look away in embarrassment, the pale inventor gives him a wink.

In one of the Kings many private chambers, jars of cold water and plates of fruit are waiting for them. Rhadamanthys waves a hand at them without looking, inviting his visitor to refresh himself. Glaucus and Deucalion wait for a few polite seconds before snatching up a couple of quinces.

The King sits down and looks hard at the man for a few long moments. Theres little sign of the laugh lines now. Daedalus was a murderer. An exile from his native Athens, for his crimes, who sold his services to my brothers court. Daedalus was a murderer, and Perdix the man he murdered.

You dont say.

You have an odd taste for an alias, if you expect me to know this and still trust you.

Not at all. I chose the name of an innocent victim.

But an Athenian. That alone would raise suspicion.

Perdix says: I never claimed to be from Athens.

Daedalus never claimed any kinship with his countrymen either. But given the chance, he sided with them against the empire. Thanks to him, the Athenians broke from their place, denied us the tribute that was rightfully ours. And now, Daedalus has lost everything, and my

brother will pursue him to the ends of the earth.

Ill let that be a lesson to me.

Father smiles. As it has been a lesson to me.

Glaucus munches his fruit, wondering when theyll stop talking in riddles. His father says: I am more than willing to make use of your services. Ill keep my mind open about where your allegiance ultimately lies.

Im on the side of civilisation, sire. Which here means the side of the empire.

Then given that I am the empire, I can take that as a sign of your personal loyalty?

With all due respect, your majesty, if anyone bears the name of the empire, it is your brother.

Father laughs, a rich sound that turns scalding. You must be foreign indeed. While Minos is the king amongst kings, hes far too busy with his love affairs and his vendetta against Daedalus to rule. Its my law that the people respond to. He claps his hands. One more duty. I want you to teach my sons.

Glaucus and Deucalion sit bolt upright. Perdix smiles, genuinely this time.

Rhadamanthys says: They should have a lot to learn from an inventor and a traveller to boot.

Id be delighted, your majesty.

The King adds: Also, you will sit in on certain council sessions. Ill want your advice on the matter of the bulls. We need a quick resolution to the situation, before any more damage is done. Help me stop the demons, and Ill hand you your own weight in electrum.

Glaucus knows his father is testing the fellow. He and his brother are already well schooled; will they catch this genius, out in ignorance? What will his advice to the King reveal about his motives and connections?

Perdix seems to understand this too. Your majesty, I can see that

serving you will be a challenge. Which I will most gratefully take on.

Britomartis, of course, is untouched by the years that have passed. Not an inch of her is less than perfect. From her new sandals, her spotless and unwrinkled tunic, to her make-up, her hair in its precise bun. Alcestis wonders if her own age makes it time to wear her hair the same way.

This woman guided her out of her girlhood, source of all wisdom and comfort, leading her by the hand towards the warmth of the Titans glow. Later, when things soured, she found Britomartis and her perfection crushingly intimidating, as though the High Priestess had hold of the floor and could whip it out from under Alcestis at any moment. And yet, here she is, walking back into the priestesss quarters: escorted by Britomartis as an honoured guest of the King instead of an acolyte fallen just short of her standards. The priestesses whisper and stare as they pass: here is the bull-killer, a woman like themselves.

Britomartis indicates a small but well-appointed room, the lodgings of a fully fledged priestess. There is even a serpent in residence, coiled lazily around a water jug in the corner. Alcestis expected subtle insults, but where the King is concerned, Britomartis doesnt play games. She has even sent acolytes ahead to place fresh flowers and fruit on the low table by the bed. She cant have arranged the snake, though: they travel through the temple precincts at their own choosing.

Nor does Britomartis seem embarrassed by Alcestiss triumphant return. But just what status does her returned acolyte have now? And how close will she let Alcestis get to the gods?

Since Im here, perhaps I could assist with the blessing ceremony.

Britomartis shows no surprise, no mocking amusement. She smoothes the front of her tunic and, as though dealing with any over-enthusiastic noblewoman, she says: The priestesses have been training for months for the blessing. You and I both know how different it is from the rest of the ritual calendar.

You and I both know how different I am from your acolytes.

Politely, Britomartis replies: We must find some place for you, killer of demons.

Alcestis has never experienced the High Priestesss diplomacy. With

startling formality, Britomartis continues. May I ask you a question?

What is it, High Priestess?

How is it done? Which of the gods has lifted you up?

Alcestis slowly shakes her head. Everything Ive learned, Ive learned from Perdix … He teaches me as though theres nothing holy in it, as though its only a craft, like the potters wheel. And yet, when I dance in the sky, its rapture. Not the rapture of communion with the Goddess, she says hungrily. But thats all I can compare it to.

It can be difficult to distinguish our personal rapture from divine ecstasy.

(Alcestis has heard this speech before.) One leads us into our own dance. The other turns us towards unity with Rhea Therasia. That is the true rapture: when we become a perfect expression of Her spirit.

What if our own dance is an expression of Her spirit?

We are all a part of Her. But we do what She asks, not what we fancy.

Alcestis didnt intend to get into a theological debate. High Priestess, what do you think about the bulls? Where are they coming from? Whos sending them?

Britomartis admits: At first, I thought it was you. Not Alcestis the scatter-brained pupil. Alcestis the bull-killer who rides the winds like a seagull, who appeared out of nowhere.

Alcestis understands at once. Just as the bulls appeared from nowhere. You expected me to demand a ransom from the King to get rid of a catastrophe Id created myself.

I was wrong. I dont believe you or Perdix know anything more about the bulls than I do. Save how to fight them, how to stave them off.

Britomartis rises, about to leave. Alcestis quickly says: About the blessing ceremony.

Let us wait. You have learned a great deal from another teacher. Well see if your conduct and deportment are enough that youre able to speak for the Goddess.

Britomartis takes her leave. Alcestis sits on the bed, staring at the flowers, unsure if the door has just been opened a crack, or whether

the High Priestess just wants to keep her quiet with hazy promises. It was how she kept them all in line, the hope of promotion, the chance of getting a little closer to Rhea Therasia.

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Later, in his palace room, she tells the Doctor She may let me take part in some of the ceremonies at least, with the acolytes. Ive talked to some of them. They want to feature me in the bull-dancing.

Hes flopped onto his belly on the bed, facing away from her, feet swinging idly in the air. His fingers are tracing the spiral wave pattern around the water-jug beside the bed, stroking across the contours of seashells impressed into the clay. This is out of period. Middle Minoan II at a guess. It seems Rhadamanthys is something of a collector.

Alcestis takes hold of one of his restless feet. I dont think any of the acolytes are likely to know anything. It would take someone senior to control the bulls. Never a novice.

Either that or the servants have stuck me in the rattiest old guest room possible, where they havent changed the clayware in a good two hundred years …

She gives up and turns away. It wouldnt be quite so annoying if the jug wasnt so gaudy and over designed.

She needs to talk to him, about the ease with which shes slipping back into the palace and its dance. Facing Britomartis, standing in the temple precincts again, felt so natural. Hes brought this out in her. Its a shadow of the same ease with which hes vaulted up several social classes, from working the docks to addressing the King in his chambers. Perhaps for him too, this is a return to grace for a fallen star except, looking at him now, sprawled along the bed, she can see how he still doesnt quite fit. Part of him is a vagabond in the great halls, just as he is an aristocrat in the gutter. The only time shed seen him truly in his element was that night in the ocean.

Its so easy for him to play a role, walk through a lie. But whether or not she can trust him, she still needs him to complete the transformation hes begun.

I need you to teach me to fight men.

He doesnt respond. His gaze keeps flicking between the workmanship of the inside of the jug, and the labyrinthine patterns embroidered on

the pillow. One distraction, clearly isnt enough for him.

She insists: Word travels fast in the palace. The people behind this … Even if they dont know were looking for them, theyll know were trying to stop the demons.

Theyll be coming for us.

Not nearly up to your standards, he says, squinting into the jug. She still cant tell if shes being heard or not.

I need to know how to follow through on an attack. How to stop them…

No response. She grabs the jug and wrenches it aside. It clatters onto the floor with a crack as one of the handles breaks away. You cant duck and dodge forever.

He looks up: the pitcher had hidden the set of his jaw, the same face shed seen in the fields when hed goaded her into strength. Oh, Ill teach you. But youll have to learn that not every blow needs your full strength. And dont underestimate the acolytes; they hear all the best gossip. They may not know where all the bodies are buried, but they can still give you an idea whos doing the burying.

And his eyes flutter back to the embroidery, without a glimpse of his previous cares.

She shakes her head in disbelief. Before she can say anything, he rolls over and looks up at her, his cheeks creasing with a smile as he heads her off. If I was passionate all the time, Id burn up.

The next day begins the parade of volunteers: preening bull-leapers and giddy acolytes, servants grasping for a better lot and bored nobles out for glory, almost every one of them young, wasp-waisted, and ambitious. Each morning, before the Doctors lessons to the princes, Rhadamanthys has him put the volunteers through their trials, to find out if any of them have the gift for flight.

Which of course he does his best not to uncover; Alcestis knows as long as she remains unique, both she and the Doctor are indispensable, and the situation remains under their control. But together, they put on a convincing show of useless lessons

a combination of the Doctors technique of dodging blows, and exercises supposedly designed to coax them off the ground. It turns

out that, without exception, the would-be saviours would never get off the ground under the weight of their own heads.

The two of them quickly grasp the potential. Each day, with suitable solemnity, she introduces the Doctor guarding her tongue to call him only Perdix in front of the newcomers and testifies to his teaching of her. Then he takes the stage. The well-oiled men from the bullring hesitate for a moment before compliantly tying the bottoms of their belted loincloths into an infants nappy (to avoid unwanted flapping in flight, the Doctor tells them). Then she leads them through a series of positions: eyes closed, wobbling on toes, arms and legs outstretched at odd angles, unaware of the dignity draining from them with each pose. Finally, she has them shift their weight just a little too far backwards, and contemplates the sight of a courtyard full of elegant bodies capsizing one by one. From high enough off the ground, she can see them topple in waves.

When the Doctor gets in on the act, its never the same stunt twice. He gets them to bounce up and down and throw their arms about, to loosen their muscles, while singing silly songs to clear their heads. He teaches them breathing exercises, just to make them go whoosh. He finds a nice soft patch of ground, then has them practice falling over till they can no longer walk in a straight line. He sits catlike, with his legs curled under him, coaxing them into forming a human pyramid, then tells everyone to wave. Sometimes hes right in the midst of it all, flailing about rubber-limbed with the best of them, baffling them further when they cant quite decide whether this is meant to be fun or not.

Oh come on, he finally says one day. If I told you to throw yourselves off a cliff, would you really do it? No, wait, better not answer that.

And through it all, he makes sure to give each prospective student individual attention: teasing from them any scraps of knowledge about the councillors to the King who most serve to benefit from unrest in the empire; gently digging for any hints as to who might have the skills and the privacy needed to summon the bulls.

Because Deucalion is older, he carries the beaten-up old helmet, while Glaucus carries the much lighter bronze dagger. Glaucus chafes; he is growing faster than Deucalion, now a little bit taller and certainly as strong. Perdix walks behind his royal pupils, carrying an ostrich feather.

They are climbing stairs that lead to one of the palace roofs, steps usually trodden only by servants who have to set banners or braziers. Their arrival sent more than a few servants into a flapping panic. Two palace guards trail behind them, uncertain whether they more greatly risk the Kings wrath by intervening or by not intervening.

The test began as one of Perdixs mock arguments. At first, the boys had thought he would be a holiday, an easy break from their usual routine of reciting histories and drawing maps from memory. But the arguments, friendly as they were, became hard work in their own right. Perdix would never let either of them get away with saying something foolish, always demanding to know how they could be sure their statements were true. They discussed the flight of birds and the nature of the volcano, the meanings of words and the outcomes of battles all under the watchful eyes of their usual tutors or some petty courtier, as though Father worried Perdix would teach them dirty rhymes.

This mornings argument was about weights and measures. Perdix demanded their opinions: did heavier objects fall to earth more quickly than lighter ones? Deucalion ventured that he wasnt certain, which surprisingly seemed to delight Perdix. Glaucus said they should test the question by dropping different weights, which delighted him even more.

The other children wanted to come to the roof as well, but Perdix forbade it, instead giving the older pair of twin sisters the job of shepherding the children in the courtyard below. From the roof, Glaucus can see theyve done a good job: the gang of royal and noble boys and girls stand in a hushed curve, well back from where helmet and dagger will land.

Secretly, Glaucus feels certain that the heavy helmet win strike the paving first, but he knows that only the test will be good enough to convince a man like Perdix.

Their new tutor makes them stand at the edge, carefully, obviously ready to grab either of them if they lose their footing. The boys exchange grins. Their athletic training has given them strong balance and cured them of height-sickness long ago.

Ill count to three, says Perdix, and when I say three, drop them both at the same instant. Ready? One, two, three!

The helmet and the dagger strike the ground together with a mighty clang. The children cheer and chatter; they have no idea what it all meant. What do you think, gentlemen? asks Perdix.

They might have landed at slightly different times, and we couldnt tell, says Deucalion.

Good point. How could we improve our test?

Go higher up, says Deucalion.

Try again with a heavier thing and a lighter one, says Glaucus. In the courtyard below, the children are already looking around for more things to be thrown off the roof. Perdix claps his hands. Excellent. You already know the answer, says Glaucus. Youve already

carried out this test.

Not personally … a friend of mine.

And they do fall just as fast as each other! Every time!

Perdix looks abashed. Yes. The earth draws down all objects at the same speed.

Then how? How can we fly?

Perdix puts a hand on Glaucuss shoulder, as if worried his pupil will put that question to the test, then and there.

So this is the source of all the excitement.

Glaucus turns around to see that his father has come up the servants steps and is standing on the roof, arms folded, watching them. He and Deucalion and Perdix all bow. He and his brother trade glances: theyre for it now.

But Rhadamanthys doesnt seem angry. How are my sons proceeding in their instruction? Excellently, your majesty. Their minds are empty of preconceptions and filled with questions.

Oughtnt you to be filling their minds with answers? says the King mildly. Now, that Ive satisfied my own curiosity, you will accompany us to the throne room for a meeting of the council. My sons will also participate, as observers. (Glaucus suppresses a groan. He would rather keep chucking things off the roof.) We will be debating the problem of Athens.

Perdix beams, disarmingly. Then we can all look forward to having our minds filled with answers.

Rhadamanthys moves in to escort his sons away from the edge. They take their citys name from my half-sister, you know.

Athena? Oh yes, of course, lovely girl. Tried to give her flute lessons once, but she wouldnt stand for it.

Surely you jest …

Well,, yes, actually.

Rhadamanthys laughs, rich and throaty. One of the disadvantages of being a child of the gods is that you rarely see your family.

Oh, I wouldnt say that was the main problem.

What would you say, then?

That youll always be a child.

Rhadamanthys glowers for a fraction, then decides to take it with good humour. In the divine realm, children overthrow their parents with startling regularity. (An eye to Perdix.) What though of mortals, who remain children in the sphere of men?

We try our best, sire. Gentlemen: one last, thing.

Perdix has been holding his ostrich feather the whole time. Now, he casts it over the edge, and for a moment it spirals upwards on the breeze, before beginning a slow flutter to earth.

Something more for you to think about, he tells the boys with a grin.

The council meeting goes on forever. Glaucus starts to clean under one fingernail with a splinter of wood. Of course Deucalion has to attend these sessions as the heir, but now that Glaucus is almost thirteen, hes being dragged to them more and more often. They want him to learn how the court works, how people say things without saying them and dont admit what they really want.

He can follow enough to tell how good Father is at this. Of course everyone says hes wise, hes the King after all, but Glaucus can see him balancing one courtiers interests against anothers, the way he leaves them all satisfied with his decisions.

Spotting everything in their faces, but giving little away with his own. Maybe that was one of the secret things they taught you on your thirteenth: how to make your face do those odd, distant, grown-up expressions. Deucalion has been doing those a lot lately, even when its just the two of them.

Right now, Nauplius the Chief Councillor, Fathers closest advisor, is insisting that they must prepare for war with Athens. Hes a skinny stick who once had a great reputation as a runner and a javelin wielder, but who now spends all his energy trying to convince Rhadamanthys to do things.

Now, that we can defend against the bulls they send, we must press our advantage, before theres another attack. Sail our men to Athenss shores and bring them to heel. Remind them of what they have forgotten the speed of our arrows and the barbs of our javelins.

But surely we dont need an army to do that? says Peneleos, at the opposite end of the horseshoe of councillors chairs. Hes a big man but a soft one, a patron to many of the craftsmen of the city. They have gods, we have gods. Petition the Fallen. No need to bring men and ships into it.

Glaucus thinks hes got it: Nauplius wants to sail an army over because he owns so many ships. Hes behind most of the trading fleet based on Thera. And Peneleos, one of the merchants who already has to pay lots for Nauplius to ship his wares, is resisting anything that might give Nauplius even more power and influence. Or disrupt his own trade.

Suddenly Perdix speaks up. Why Athens?

Theyd all forgotten Perdix was there. They turn to see him perched on the edge of a table watching them, and Nauplius starts to explain to the foreigner as if to a child.

Theyve resented us ever since the last, war. Since we laid siege to them after their part in the death of Minoss son Androgeos. And now that their old king Aegeus, and Minoss son Asterius, have both died, theyve declared that we are no longer due our tributeYes, well, Im sure they need killing just on principle, but how do you know theyre responsible for the bulls?

Glaucus perks up, watching the councillors fumble. Perdix is using the same trick on them that he uses on him and Deucalion: the unduckable question. And since they wont even admit most of what

they do know, having to admit theres something they dont know is making them turn all sorts of interesting colours.

He glances at his father. Hes still unsure what the King thinks of Perdix. He treats him almost like another king. Could it be the new teacher really is of divine descent just like the royal family? Does that mean hes wise, or could he be stirring up mischief? If the gods love anything, they love trouble.

Anyone could have asked the gods to bring this down on you … always assuming someone like Rhea didnt just get annoyed off her own bat, of course. But whoever did this could be anywhere. Why decide theyre in Athens?

Well, its obvious, declares Peneleos. They hate us. They have to live somewhere.

Athens hates us. They live in Athens.

Perdix smiles indulgently. Nauplius hates you, and he doesnt live in Athens …

Glaucus cant help it he laughs out loud at Naupliuss flustered blustering in his own defence, and Peneleoss cowlike bewilderment. Deucalion shoots him a shut-up glance, but its clear he gets it too Perdix is picking up the same sort of things theyre supposed to, but breaking every rule by saying them.

Thankfully, Father looks amused and tolerant. His voice cuts across the others: Peneleos, you were, giving us your counsel?

Peneleos says: At the very least, we ought to let the gods decide if they want to, take action themselves.

But Perdix, his face still sunny, wont let up. Oh, surely the gods are always in accord with what the King decides. Its a mark of his great wisdom …

The King stands, up. Glaucus holds his breath. Everyone falls silent: no-one wants to, share in whatever doom Perdix has just drawn down upon himself.

Instead, he dismisses the councillors with a wave of his hand, and descends from his throne to, close on Perdix still sitting on the table kicking his legs like a little boy.

Its clear theres something important that you dont understand about our empire.

Come with me.

***

The King leads him up and out of the rear of the palace. The grand steps here are inverted, leading upwards into the slope of the mountain rather than down to, level ground. At the top, the palace spreads out below them, a sprawling stack of alabaster cubes stretching down to, the sea. Its squared-off white turned fiery orange in the sunset.

From there they follow a former goat-track, now painstakingly paved, folding back and forth up the side of the volcano. The Kings guards trail far behind, anxiously grasping the hilts of their swords. The light leaves them halfway up, and the Doctor must stay close to, Rhadamanthyss lantern.

Youve wondered why the palace is here, says Rhadamanthys.

Well, it had crossed my mind that an active volcano wasnt the best of neighbours.

If nothing else, it does tend to, dwarf you.

There hasnt been an eruption in decades, and nor will there be. Just as there hasnt been an earthquake at Knossos in living memory. And that stretches back quite a way.

The glint in the Kings eye suggests humour, but his tone says that any joke is his alone through eminent domain.

The Doctor can feel the heat now, closing in on his skin. At times it seems to, be radiating straight up from the bare rock of the mountain. The night is sticking to, him now. Above them, the Doctor can see a plaster-walled shrine, balanced near the peak, lit faintly red from the far side of the ridge. The King commands him onwards to, the door.

Inside, and the far wall is missing an open precipice, with a smouldering glow beneath. The walls on either side are studded with fragments of crystal, catching shards of the fire and reflecting them; the large quartz on the central altar hints at only the tiniest flicker inside. Past the altar, and the chamber broadens out to, a wide stone lip: the Doctor is looking down, over the inner cliff, to, the sea of

searing magma stretching across the crater.

Rhadamanthys stretches out a hand towards the magma below.

Tartarus.

The Doctor stands,, taking it in as best he can.

Down there the gods themselves are imprisoned, Rhadamanthys tells him. The Titans, overthrown by their children for their wickedness.

And we have been blessed with the key to, their gaol.

Oh, murmurs the Doctor. So thats how it works.

His face gives no advantage away, his eyes flick about like a cornered animal. In the magma below, he can just make out glints of hot light set amidst the dull red glow

uncountable numbers of the crystals, impossibly floating in the magma, like a thousand eyes in the darkness.

He allows himself a slight grin. Edgar Cayce would have been delighted: Atlantiss crystals of power, just as his psychic readings said. The Fallen are ours to, command. The forces of sea, sun, wind, time

they can all be brought forth by our words. So no eruptions, then? Four harvests in a year? Sunshine on a cloudy

day?

All the best for our empire. We can mould the world as we wish.

They stand on the lip of the volcano: the Doctor at the edge, the King moving slowly towards him. The Doctor is poised on his feet, ready to, run. The guards are nowhere to, be seen.

Rhadamanthys smiles, old and wolfish. And Rhea, the mother of all, stood with her children at the gates of Tartarus, as they cast down her tyrant husband Cronus, and all his brothers in power.

He clasps the Doctors arm, a gesture of friendliness, an assertion of strength near the edge. His unsmiling eyes lock on the Doctors. Is that how you see yourself, Perdix? Overthrowing the tyrant?

The Doctor returns the arm-clasp, just as firm: measuring each others strength.

Ive always been good with children.

Rhadamanthys speaks simply. If you return from this precipice without me, you will be executed as a regicide, and my line will go on. If I return from here without you, no-one will say a word. That, friend Perdix, is the only reality.

He releases the Doctor and turns, pacing slowly round the altar.

You wondered why we do not seem to, fear the gods, continues Rhadamanthys. Instead, we respect them, with all the comfort of familiarity. We have been given our task, and our reward. Beyond that, our affairs are our own … but neither do we attempt to interfere in theirs. You too have your task, and your reward.

Yes, I do get the point, sire. And let me assure you that I know, my place.

Oh, Im sure you feel you do. But I dont think that you fully comprehend mine.

Hes closed in on the Doctor again: punctuating his final word with a turn and a raised hand: a single small gesture that takes in the temple, the fiery pit, the island, everything.

Oh, I do, your majesty. You lay down the law, like a mat you can walk over without sullying your feet.

Rhadamanthys glowers. The Doctor raises his hands submissively.

I meant no disrespect.

Yes you did.

Well, I can hardly contradict you, now can I?

You meant disrespect, but its the disrespect of the powerless. And thus I can overlook it. You know, that for all your mockery, you cannot overwhelm me. You can only pray I listen.

Oh I understand that.

Now, the Doctor turns to, the King, drawing himself up, to, his full height. In this reality of yours, theres no law beyond force. No tradition, no agreements, no wisdom, just strength. You welcome that, because youre the strongest one. Any rule or treaty or covenant can be broken on a whim. I havent the brute strength to force you to look

beyond yourself, any more than I have the words to describe sight to a blind man. I cant even whisper in your ear, Remember you are mortal, because word has it you arent even that. Truly there is no law at all that binds you … except the law of cause and effect. And thats as immutable as gravity.

Gravity?

… Oh for heavens sake. Thats the trouble with the Bronze Age, it cramps my metaphors. Look.

He takes a coiled golden armlet from his arm, throws it upwards. When it hits the floor it lets out a metallic chime.

Throw something upward, it falls. Push something, it pushes back. Use your power as a club, youll have to, hold ever tighter to, keep it from being wrested away.

Resentment from other nations, from your own courtiers, from the common people is earned by your actions, just as much as trust or respect. Call it fate, call it economics, there are still forces that remain beyond your control.

He picks the armlet up, again. Cronus is cruel to his wife and children, eventually they cast down him and all his brothers. Everything falls.

And he throws the armlet into the volcano. Rhadamanthys starts, instinctively reaches to, catch it, but its lost in the night. He turns back to, the Doctor in astonishment and hes holding the armlet in his other hand, a catlike grin on his face.

Everything falls, he says again.

Even things that fly?

The Doctor holds his tongue for a moment. Even those.

The King, takes the Doctors arm again, gently this time, escorting him towards the door.

I provide for my people. They have the best lives of any people in the known world.

I want to see them free of this scourge, and on that we coincide. Let that be an end to it.

Oh, Im glad to, serve you in this. But like I said, it does not end.

Alcestis hears all about it that night, in his room, as they spar in slow motion. She hovers, holding contorted poses just clear of each prolonged blow, learning to, keep her balance in any possible position.

He tells her: The Kings made it quite clear the only reason he hasnt clapped me in irons is because he needs me to defeat the demons. Which does rather rule out him being the one behind them.

But of course he isnt.

The Doctor raises an eyebrow, still in slow motion. Why not?

Hes the King.

You think he wouldnt make that sort of sacrifice, if he felt it necessary? Even after all youve been through, on this island,?

The empire stands, for him. Hes capable of many things, but not of making himself or the empire look weak and defenceless. No gain could be worth that.

He nods, thoughtfully. She feels a twinge of surprise that he has something to, learn from her.

She shifts her balance, goes on the attack: twists past to, get behind him, pulling his hand behind his back, reaching around for the choke-hold and pressure point. He wriggles free, his hair brushing across her face, and gives her a nod and a wink as reward for the move. When she catches his eyes, suddenly with a shiver she knows exactly why she feels so off-centre.

Something wrong,?

She doesnt answer. Then, slowly, she settles to, the ground.

The demons will be here tomorrow.

So that night, the Doctor starts, throwing stones into the water. Every scrap of palace gossip hes been gathering goes into play: he makes the rounds of all his courtier suspects, in some cases through their servants, and plants with each one a titbit about something that one of the other courtiers might be about to do. A fact specially tailored to this courtiers agenda, such that, to seize the advantage, one will feel the need to watch the other incessantly. Spies and counterspies. No matter which among them takes time from his routine today to

summon the bulls, someone will see it, someone will know. And the Doctor will notice the knowing. He may not be able to watch all of them at once, but he has his eye on the ripples of reaction spreading from any unseen encounter.

Theyve agreed not to tell anyone: theres no defence the Minoans can offer to the bulls, nowhere to, hide. All Alcestis can do is prepare herself for tomorrows battle. All the Doctor can do is watch and wait. He shadows Peneleos, who galumphs after Nauplius, who in turn is keeping an eye on an ambitious, officious record-keeper named Amythaon. They form a strangely nonchalant line, each meandering purposefully along the palace portico. The Doctor grins; from above, on her patrol, Alcestis must be able to follow the intricate pattern of the palace waltz.

Hes cobbled the entirety of court politics into a single ramshackle machine, and wound it up, to, see where it will go. But after the first runner comes charging into the palace with news of the latest attack on Akrotiri, hes startled to see Peneleos abandon stealth and approach Nauplius directly. Their conversation is full of implication and indirection a mating dance for poisonous snakes but the aim is clear: neither would suggest the other had any control over the bulls, or that they had any themselves, but they both recognise that if either were to find any such information, it would be quite possible to work out a mutually beneficial arrangement for the use of such power, for the benefit of the empire of course.

The Doctor slumps against a pillar and blinks repeatedly, his mind full of gears grinding and drive shafts popping loose. This could turn out to be more complicated than he thought.

Glaucus fidgets. Father had warned that his name would come up, during this council meeting. Hes the only observer this time Deucalion is off throwing javelins or some such. To Glaucus, its a surprise that its possible to be bored and excited at the same time.

His mind wanders during the opening discussions: financial reports (wealth), agricultural reports (plenty), petitions from courtiers (trivial). Then two eyewitnesses are brought in to describe the latest battle between Alcestis and not one but two of the monstrous fire bulls. Everyone sits up to take notice as the merchants cringe before Rhadamanthys and tell how the woman danced in the sky. How she danced over the buildings, how the bulls hooves turned rooftops to dust where they touched, but how they never quite reached the ground, furious, captivated.

Following her at last, out to sea, sending up great walls and hills of steam, until all three figures were lost to sight.

Perdix listens to, their story with his eyes closed, a faint proud smile, as though seeing it all behind his eyelids. He opens them only when Nauplius, introduces the next subject for discussion: retaliation against Athens. Again. But this time Peneleos has an idea.

We dont have to go to all that effort, for the rivers of blood and all that. Its very simple. We unleash the Fallen upon Athens.

His words are met with murmurs of surprise, cautious nods, and one low laugh that drips acid.

Oh of course. Let God sort em out.

Glaucus gulps. For a subject to, laugh at the Kings plan of war would be treason

what would it be for a foreigner? But Father hasnt yet expressed his own view. In fact, hes smiling toothily at soft Peneleoss wrath.

Didnt you want the Titans unleashed just to combat the bulls, before Alcestis came?

Im not quite proud enough to feel I can treat unchaining the gods lightly.

But the sheer cost of a war …

(Finally, mutters Perdix, loudly.)

… the loss of trade, the workers drawn away …

Then go and account for it. Do your sums. You may yet make a case; I just said I wouldnt treat it lightly. In the meantime, Nauplius, start pricing out a fleet.

A ripple of cross-conversation spreads through the councillors, with Perdixs voice trying to, cut through. His call for attention getting more insistent. Whats the matter the traders in Athens driving too hard a bargain?

Youre quick to speak up for Athens, o schoolmaster, says Nauplius, lightly.

They havent attacked you, theyd have to be mad to, no-ones even

tried to invade your empire for centuries. You cant even see that this is no less mad than it was before?

But when Glaucus glances round to see the councillors reactions, they are not outraged, or stony, but glancing at each other with hints of smiles. One even pretends to sneeze, hiding a laugh. And Father? He is smiling politely, tolerantly, as though indulging the twin sisters in one of their little performances of poetry.

They have listened to Perdixs words only in order to make their own opinions seem wiser than the blustering of an ill-spoken foreign eccentric. If they already know what hes going to say, they dont have to think about it.

Perdix can tell what is happening. He ought to have sunk back into his seat in shame, but instead hes holding his ground. I see, he says. One good atrocity deserves another.

Rhadamanthys claps his hands the signal for a new topic of discussion and now Perdix takes his seat again. Of the matter of my sons coming of age, says the King, and oddly, no one glances at Glaucus. Tomorrow my son Glaucus turns thirteen, and becomes an adult. As

Glaucus is second in line to the throne, his training shall be as a warrior. In these difficult times, we will have need of his wisdom and judgement in the field. As is the custom, he must know no privilege of rank or title in the years of his apprenticeship at war. Tomorrow, his name will be taken from him. After his blessing ceremony, he must see no-one. He will then travel to Heraklion to serve in our army, where I know, he will distinguish himself without need for royal name or royal title.

Glaucus realises he has sagged lower and lower into his chair. He snaps himself upright, not deigning to, show emotion. But his glance catches that of Perdix, who looks stricken with sorrow.

For the rest of the day, its like the ground keeps moving under him. All the other noble children and their parents keep crowding and congratulating him, but he cant escape the strangeness when they refer to his future as warrior or soldier instead of minister or judge. He has no idea why Father seems to, have changed his mind.

Even Deucalion seems dazed when he hugs him. Grateful and sad and strangely distant, as if he has to feel like Glaucus has already left

before he can bring himself to say goodbye. His own brother was little more than a rumour to him until four or five years ago, when Father finally let them spend time together; before then Deucalion, as the heir, had been kept firmly out of sight of the other young children, just as the young ones were kept apart from the older ones. But in the years since then, as Deucalion has gone from towering over him to just about the same size, theyve become inseparable. Now, Deucalion looks like hes going to be lonely again, but he looks away and says hell be fine.

Finally he escapes the well-wishers and finds Perdix, nestled between the tapering columns of the palace portico, staring at nothing. He sits, grateful to have the chance not to talk.

I knew it wouldnt be easy, he finally says, trying to, sound sensible and wise.

They say making a prince is like making a sword.

They do?

Yes. A lot of fire and pounding.

They cant help smiling at his unhappy joke. It wont be that bad, says Glaucus.

Oh, itll be terrible, says Perdix, eyes wide and serious. Theyll try to bully every last, bit of doubt out of you. To make it so your first reflex is to think in terms of fighting. And theyll keep telling you that only you are responsible for yourself, because that way you wont think that maybe theyve got responsibilities to you too.

Glaucus is quiet at that. Will I be all right?

Perdix stares into space, pensively, as if trying to, make up, something wise to, say. Finally he shrugs, and looks Glaucus in the eye. I dont know which way the wind will blow you. But you can be. And you will be, so long as you keep an eye on how theyre trying to shape you.

Glaucus shrugs. Ive known people whove come back from Heraklion. Procriss father.

He came out all right. (His voice gets quieter.) Catreus didnt come back.

Catreus?

Half-brother. They told us he was killed fighting pirates. And we havent heard from Sarpedon my other one for a year and a half, since he went …

At least that means hes probably still alive.

I suppose so …

Glaucus plucks up, a weed from the neglected stone. I dont mind the fighting. Im not bad at it. But they still want me to be more than a fighter, dont they? All those council sessions. Learning from you … (Unless, Glaucus thinks with a twinge, perhaps Fathers change of heart is because he wants the generals to undo what Perdix has been doing.)

And Perdix seems to have picked up on his thoughts. Well, of course they want you to be able to think for them, use logic to get from A to B … but if you question their choice of A, who knows what mischief you might get up to?

Glaucus manages a smile. I suppose I can try.

And Perdixs grin is a rich reward. He stands, stretches, leaning against the pillar.

Then he mimes pushing the pillar over. Stands back: his finger tracing in the air the path of each pillar as it ticks into the next, down the length of the portico, all around the palace. He turns to, Glaucus, and with a rain of fingers and a burst of noise he conjures up, the sight of everything above, them falling down around their ears. Hes smiling, but its a strange look playful or frustrated or even wistful, Glaucus cant tell.

Come on, says Perdix. Theres something you might like to, see.

Perdix leads him from the palace, into the low scrubland outside the walls. He doesnt know, how Perdix managed to, keep the guards from noticing their departure; his usual bodyguards have been left behind. Its an exhilarating feeling, and one he should get used to, after tomorrow.

The peace you knew, before the bulls, that wasnt an accident or an illusion it was because people found ways to defuse aggression. Other solutions. Not just go for the obvious and the ugly. Not always, not

perfectly, but they chose to be better than their worst.

Not often enough, says Glaucus.

So thats an excuse for you not to,? snaps Perdix. Then more gently: If it was easy, it wouldnt be a choice.

He raises his hand, and a shape from above, descends towards them. Glaucuss eyes adjust to the sun: its Alcestis, circling down to land on her toes before them.

Shes poised and queenly, as always. Shes also embarrassed. She hasnt talked to him much before now, but hed never thought that she might be as awkward around him as he was around her.

Perdix beams. Ah. Alcestis here has a birthday present for you.

I dont usually do this, highness, she says, trying not to study the ground. But since youre leaving … and youve never seen the palace from the air, I thought …

He says yes at speed. Before he can think again, shes crouching down, and Perdix is boosting him up onto her back. His arms clasp across her collarbone; her own hands are reaching back to hold onto his waist, and hes trying not to let her know how much hes enjoying this already.

She wobbles, and he can hear her smiling. Dont tell your friends, or theyll all want a ride. My back isnt that strong.

And she stands, and keeps standing, and suddenly Perdix is shrinking away below him, watching him go with a tiny wave and a wry smile. She holds still in the sky, supporting him, as he looks down at his teacher.

Hes very proud of you, she murmurs.

Is this one more lesson? Before I go?

Maybe. She turns her head, and theres a sudden smile in front of him. But as for me, I just like the view.

And she takes him higher, swaying in the breeze, and his breath catches as his home stands, revealed beneath him as hes never seen it before.

Glaucuss heart beats hard as he walks. He feels that he could float up, off the path. His father walks beside him. At this moment, they are like equals; the son is one with the King, the King is one with his son. All his brothers walk behind them.

When Glaucus lifts his eyes to his father, Rhadamanthys looks back with stern pride, and Glaucuss heart empties of its fear of the volcano and swells to fill his chest.

The three-walled shrine is before them. Glaucus strips off his sandals and his loincloth; he will meet the gods in the same state in which they created him. It makes little difference, here in the baking heat of the calderas edge. The others turn back at the threshold and descend the mountain as the four of them step inside: Britomartis and Deucalion, and Glaucus and the King, side by side.

The shrine is unlit except for the red breath of the volcano, and the brilliant crystals in the walls, throwing back the hot light, split into thousands of sparkles and rainbows.

The ritual is brief. Britomartis intones the pedigree of the gods, reciting verses of praise after each of their names. Glaucus barely hears her soaring voice. Hes captivated by the brilliance of the crystals, his eyes strengthening a little at a time, able to take in more of the light. The crystals net of facets and edges seems like hundreds of doors to him, like a mighty palace folded up into a puzzle. He rubs his fingertips together in the dry heat. He wants to throw those doors open, explore the places kept for the priesthood, grasp every last, mystery of Thera and the whole world.

Behind him, Rhadamanthys intones the name of Cronus, Rheas husband, Gaias saviour, father-slayer, child-eater, Lord of the Golden Age. The chant thickens in the Kings throat, becomes a groan.

The heat in the three-walled shrine blossoms. Sweat bursts out of Glaucus, running in rivers behind his ears and down his thighs. He flicks droplets from the tips of his fingers. He holds his ground; it wouldnt do for the Kings son to scare at a mere breath from the volcano.

A moment later the heat begins to sting his skin. Glaucus squints, pushing his sweat-heavy hair out of his face, resisting the urge to cup his genitals to protect the tender flesh from Tartaruss wrath. He looks around for a reassuring glance from his father.

The fire crystals in the walls flicker like rainbows gripped by a seizure.

They throw their dancing light over Britomartis, over his fathers stony face.

Their eyes meet. Glaucus can no longer make out the individual sounds of the chant.

He feels a deep, hot pressure, somewhere beneath his heart.

His fathers face melts, for an instant, into a look of deep pride, and something else. Gratitude. Thank you, he mouths. Glaucus does his best to smile through blistering lips.

In Cronus name, says his fathers mouth.

Glaucus flinches. His hands are hurting unbearably. He raises them to his face. They are the hands of an old, old man, spotted and hooked, skin hanging thin from aching bones.

Glaucus touches his young face with his ancient hands. His hair tugs at his scalp, growing, flowing down to the small of his back. His feet are burning on the paved floor of the shrine, making him shuffle. Smoke rises up, where he lifts his feet away from the stone. One foot matches his withered hands, the nails grown into helices, the leg becoming slack and bent.

He tumbles onto the floor. Tumours blossom through his entire body, swelling in seconds to press cruelly into tender organs. His brittle bones break like chalk as he rolls this way and that. He sees a pair of feet stumble back, out of his reach, and realises they belong to Deucalion. His brother gazes up, at the ceiling, jaw clenched.

Glaucus curls at his fathers feet. Rhadamanthys is untouched by the catastrophe. He looks down at the white-haired wreckage of his son with love.

He steps back as Glaucuss broken frame smokes and shatters into ashes and is gone, swallowed alive.

Britomartis places a hand on the Kings arm.

He never made a sound, says Rhadamanthys. Not one sound. I was so proud of him.

Three: Burn

The next morning, Deucalion wakes up with his teachers hands round his throat.

He starts, to cry out, then realises the hands are on his shoulders, shaking him awake. His eyes find Perdix leaning over him, but theres no comfort there just a mask-like set to his face, and eyes looking him over like something cold and dead.

How many brothers have you had?

Deucalion whimpers.

No use prevaricating, we know what happened. Shes very sensitive, you know.

The fingers are tight against his shoulder-blades. Perdixs voice is flat as a stone.

He leans back, and Deucalion can see Alcestis above, him, a spider on the ceiling, black-and-white in the moonlight. Shes staring down from the light-well in the roof, the open sky behind her.

Call for the guard and well be gone before he can get in here. Utterly gone. Youll never see us again, well leave every one of you to rot in your own juices. So this is your only chance to tell the truth.

He tries to shrink away into the bedding, to twist himself up, into a little ball.

But the hands on his shoulders pin him flat and, no matter how much he bends his head or screws his eyes shut, the voice goes on. The murmur getting louder, harsher, having to fight to keep itself low. The nightmare that Perdix, his teacher, the cleverest man in the world, is angry enough to kill him.

What was it like? Did they throw him into the volcano, while you stood by and watched? Or did they make you do it? Did you hide your eyes, or could you not take them off him? Was there blood? Was there bone? Did they put the knife in your hands, pat you on the back for being brave? Or did you just not think about it? Did he cry?

Did you cry? Did anybody cry?

He hadnt cried. Not since the first time, when they told him he had to

be a king.

But now Perdix is shouting at him, his own voice breaking, and he cant say anything without it coming out as a howl. He cant say it. He cant not say it.

I didnt do it! They did it to me …

What did they do?

The Fallen, they summoned them …

But why did they come? What were, they doing?

No answer. Perdixs voice is quieter now, almost hopeless. What was it for?

They gave me the rest of his life.

Silence. Slowly the hands gripping his shoulders go slack. Deucalion pulls his eyes open, blinks his way through the tears, sees Perdix blinking as well. He looks crumpled. Alcestis above him, her mouth an appalled O, clutching the sides of the light-well to keep from falling. Perdix looks down at him, shaking his head slowly

the rage transformed, redirected.

Oh, the thing theyve tried to make you into.

They want the kingdom to live forever. The King, takes his share too. Hes going to live for hundreds of years already. We both are.

Alcestis gives up her battle, settles in a heap at the foot of the bed. She whispers: So that means that poor little boy wasnt the first …

Kings have all the children they want. He farms them, on the servant-girls. And theyre all raised to thirteen to make sure they dont die young, that theyll have a long life ahead … and then they feed that life to me. All their lives.

Thus avoiding nasty little succession battles. All thats left is his hand-picked heir. Oh, how elegant.

Perdix turns on his heel and stalks to the wall clawing at it, trying to pull himself off the ground with his fingernails. Every muscle in his back is knotted. When he turns back, flakes of the plaster come with him, revealing

the timber and packed rubble behind. Hes calmer now, tightly coiled.

Deucalion? How old are you? Really?

Twenty. I think.

So it slows the ageing

…

Alcestis speaks now, from the far side of her hardened face. So this has been going on for years.

Deucalion nods.

And you, little prince, have never

done anything to stop it.

Alcestis … interjects Perdix.

They still dont know.

She wants to burn him, he wants to excuse him, but neither of them is even thinking why hes silent.

Im not the first, he

whispers.

Perdix kneels beside the bed again. Not the first?

I was the fourth son. Sthenelus was first. When I was thirteen, we were taken up on the mountain. But Sthenelus … My father wasnt happy with him. And when the Fallen came, he had them feed Sthenelus to me instead.

Now, hes crying. The tears dont burst out, its just that every bit of him between the tears and the outside has been levelled. And so he keeps you on a nice short leash. So you know just what

will happen if you challenge the status quo. Very neat. He rolls over and grabs for Perdix, who hugs him back just as fiercely.

Its startling how hard and lumpy he is. He looks so smooth. But hes holding on to him, and he can even feel a soft awkward hand from Alcestis on his shoulder. As the whole world quakes theyre steady around him.

Its all right, its all right … well no, its not all right. But youll be spared. Youll be spared.

Alcestis sweeps alongside him, wing-sleeves trailing, too busy churning to realise shes not walking. He holds the lantern as he paces slowly up, the winding track, the palace spread out below them.

She offers: I could carry you. Wed get there in thirty seconds.

What makes you think I want to get there before Im ready?

Sorry.

The hot breeze is blowing through her, leaving her thoughts tumbling in its wake.

How could he? he mutters. Oh, cruelty doesnt surprise me, but it still amazes me.

People must have known.

It wasnt in their interest to think about it.

So, like the court. Short-sighted. Fickle. No-one looking beyond their next advantage …

Dont blame the blind.

They dont want to see. Weve got to force them to look, we

He turns to her, his thoughts suddenly exploding out. If we topple the King, while the demons are still attacking, what do you think that will do to the empire, mm?

Chaos? Violence? Retaliation? A search for scapegoats? And if the truth comes out, what do you think will happen to Deucalion? Do you really think theyd let him take the throne? Or will it end up, in the hands of someone like Nauplius now with even more reason to be harsh?

The questions come so fast she physically feels the need to duck. He cant see how tightly shes wound, hes got no idea why.

Theres always a good reason not to act, she mutters.

We are acting. But carefully.

He rounds a hairpin bend, then they continue upwards. We can put a word in when we reach the summit. If the gods refuse to play any longer, thatll put an end to it.

And thats it? Leave the King, leave everyone unpunished? Is that your justice?

One crisis at a time. The King will still be here, no matter what, but if we dont stop the demons …

If we do stop the demons, will anyone care to challenge him?

He hesitates at that, and she pushes harder. We have to tell the truth. I have to know … We all have to know, how far its gone.

And if it costs Deucalion his life?

Its not just Deucalion.

But hes the keystone. Who takes the fall for the Kings hubris? Will you punish the boy for his fathers crime?

Its not just his crime…

He doesnt notice the weight shes putting on her words. If only he would notice, if only he would ask. He paces onward, losing himself in thought.

A word erupts from her. Please …

She stumbles in front of him, touches the ground, feels it unsteady beneath her feet.

Her face contorts. He waits for her words to come.

Im forty-eight years old.

For a heart-stopping moment, she sees him look over her body, his eyes judging her.

Finally he speaks, quietly. Not just Deucalion, then.

The blessing ceremonies … We pass the blessings taken from the

Fallen on to all the people. Extra harvests in the year. Extra years in their youth.

With a little extra on top for the loyal priestesses as well …

Theres a slight smile on his lips. She has no idea what hes thinking, what hes feeling. Whether his words were, meant as dispassionate, mocking, accusing, even playful. Normally thats part of the fascination, now its rattling her.

We always thought they were free. But they cant have been, can they? All the years … all the people … where are they coming from?

He shakes his head, at a loss. She tells herself the hardness in his eyes isnt directed at her, when he finally says Something else to ask your gods.

He offers her his hand, to escort her further up, the path, and she nearly pulls away. She can feel every inch of her body right now, feel how tired and shrivelled it deserves to be, and even a touch of softness feels like a lie.

Then they round the last, bend before the sanctuary, and in a dizzying instant the gods gather her up. She brings her hands together and raises them to her face in a gesture of delight. The gods are a line of power running down her spine, a robe of peace wrapping around her heart. In seconds, all the terrible revelations and suspicions run away like water, and shes like a child again, carefree, knowing all is well.

She glances at the Doctor, standing beside her outside the holy of holies, the three-walled shrine. He has the wide-eyed and itchy look of someone whos sure theyre being watched.

Youre aware of them.

Yes.

Alcestis cant help but do a little pirouette on the path. Shes washed clean by their presence, warmed and fed and comforted. Their gaze is nothing like a human glance, jealous over petty details, wondering what advantage she might bring them.

Its more the gaze of someone looking out over the mountains, powerfully aware and yet detached, at peace. Theres no deliberate mercy, no personal touch; their very distance is what makes them cool in the centre of the heat.

The Doctor has wrapped his arms around himself, as though he is cold on the very lip of hell.

I know who they are, he says. He tips and turns his head, as though trying to hear something clearly, a distant song, or an actor from the back of the crowd.

What do you mean?

The Doctor sits down on the path, abruptly, rubbing at his eyes. There are many ways for evolution to run up, a blind alley. Imagine tiny creatures that live at the very bottom of the sea. No sunlight, endless gloom.

Tartarus, she says.

Theres only one source of warmth: the volcano, where it bleeds lava into the sea through cracks at its base. Its their only food, the only source of the energy in their world. They cannot evolve further in their hot, dark, heavy world. And so they evolve outwards … into creatures untrammelled by the bounds of mortal existence.

Beings that exist outside of time, able to enter or leave it as they please. (He gropes for a metaphor.) As a frog can enter or leave the water of a pond, and can see the creatures in it from above. Your gods evolved to leave time, the way that fish evolved to leave the water. Colonising a new environment.

Is any of what Im saying making sense to you?

Ah. Youre saying that the Titans came from the deep sea at the foot of the volcano, and that they werent always so powerful.

He looks pleased, but thankfully not surprised, that she has understood. Mostly, however, he has the look of someone distracted by a headache.

What I can grasp only through mathematics is as natural to them as swimming.

She slides her hand beneath his hair at the base of his neck and scratches, as though hes one of the half-wild cats that inhabit the town. His shoulders relax, just a little.

There are only a handful of them left. The others have all sailed out into the vortex. These few have stayed … because of the humans.

Because you amused them. And then one of your people, or one of theirs, found a way to bind them. Theyre tied down to the volcano, as trapped as any fish living in the hot, dark waters.

Alcestis stands, up, and offers him her hand. Come inside, she says.

The gems shine like stars in the red blackness of the shrine. The Doctor stands, near the altar, near the edge, looking down into the magma where the crystals sparkle like moonlight on water.

With a feeling like a great sigh, the Fallen are, there, all around them. Their bodies, trapped deep in Tartarus, are nowhere to be seen. But Alcestis feels the pressure of their eyes from the crystals all around. They have arrived unsummoned, curious, tasting the air.

Wings, says the Doctor. Scorching.

Alcestis touches his arm. Dont be afraid.

There are, so many of them. An entire species in thrall. All looking at me. All looking to me.

Pray to them, she murmurs. Theyll hear you.

The Doctor straightens, and his brow smoothes. She can hear the gods listening, waiting.

Hello, he says aloud. Im the Doctor. And I want you to stop.

Theres a rustling in the glowing darkness, as though thousands of moths are flapping through the shrine, in love with the glistening crystals. The Doctor turns, and turns again, as though trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. But the whispering she feels is just a feathers

touch inside her head. Stop what? The rustling turns to laughter for a moment, then dies away again, into

listening.

I want you to stop co-operating with Rhadamanthys. I want you to stop devouring the Minoans children and grafting that stolen time onto the ones the King tells you to.

Crackling laughter works through her, like claws over her flesh. Alcestis is struck dumb with terror. This is not how you speak to the gods. You dont treat them as equals.

And yet, the Doctor is still standing, still breathing.

What is he?

Another wash

of sensation: sudden sharp awareness of the wall of bone around her mind. Constraint, power bound, grounded. No choice. No food. No freedom.

Ill find a way to free you, offers the Doctor.

A mix of laughter, of curious murmurs, an angry buzzing undertone through her teeth.

Alcestis starts praying, silently, worshipping, praising, pleading. But theyre not listening to her.

Stop obeying Rhadamanthys. Go on strike! Refuse to do his bidding.

Youre gods

why let yourselves be pushed around by some mortal, even if he is a King,?

Her bones are, laughing again, buzzing in their sockets, grinding faintly against

one another. Tiny lightning-shocks of disdain through her heart: the King, not

commanding, no control. He doesnt have the wisdom. He doesnt have the knowledge.

Hes not the one.

Britomartis, says the Doctor.

Britomartis, says Alcestis.

A shiver of

certainty.

Alcestis sinks her fingers into the Doctors shoulder, suddenly urgent, unmindful of her gods. Ill make her tell us. The Doctor looks into her

face.

Despite the dimness, his pupils have

shrunk to points, as though too much light is being poured into them. Yes, he says.

That might be best. She turns without a word and leaps from the ridge outside the door, her arms spread wide.

The Doctor smiles tightly. He begins to put his hands in his pockets, before realising that he hasnt got any. Now, shes gone, he tells the gods, with something dancing in his eyes, we can really talk.

Britomartis descends into the pit, listening to the earth breathe around her. From here, the few flickering lamps that light the shrine disappear from view, leaving only the faintest sense of a glow above her. The full moon, high and tiny, framed in the light-well in the ceiling above the pit, serves only to outline rather than brighten.

She takes her position cross-legged on the limestone floor. Around her a scattering of snakes are emerging from their burrows through the cracks in the pit walls, but aside from the faintest brush they pay her no heed. Not for her the vast Python of Rhea at Delphi, who keeps her Pythia entranced; the gods that Britomartis serves are, small things.

She doesnt close her eyes; she simply wills herself not to notice the last wisps of light, and her sight becomes irrelevant. Here in the pit, in the cool earth beloved of Rhea, all else drops away. The life moves around her, but she is enfolded, so well secured that she can turn inward without fear. Here she searches the floor of her mind for any stray specks of doubt. When she finds one, she picks it up, examines it, and carefully sweeps it away, till her conscience is as smooth and perfect as the shrine itself. She sees nothing else.

But still she notices the moon going out. She looks up to see the vast winged shape hurtling through the light-well, straight down towards her and feels the hands of Alcestis pull her roughly away from the earth.

They speak without words. The gods are, amused by the need to explain themselves in equations, the mathematics of higher dimensions. They find it especially entertaining that to the Doctor, these numbers are profound, efforts to describe the deep processes of the universe. The highest expression of which he is capable.

You dont belong here at all, he says finally. (He is dimly aware that he is lying on the shrines floor.) You belong free, in the vortex.

A further flood of terms and factors, hints of the unimaginable shapes they describe.

Timeless things, held within time, but able to be released.

And, murmurs the Doctor, you can reach out of your prison to manipulate time. You can carry out the orders youre given.

Slow needles of ice through his head, fury stretched through tens of thousands of years. The shapes behind his eyes collapsing and constricting to one set of solutions showing how they can reach beyond their temporal cage without being able to leave it. How their powers are restrained, proscribed: their fantasies of ageing Rhadamanthys to a fossil, of reducing Britomartis to an embryo. The waves and winds that they could minutely disturb, to reduce the island, to dust beyond their reach.

Their glory constrained by mathematics.

And yet you can send the bulls. (He can see it in the numbers now, the loophole someone has found.) Bursts of directed chronons. Riding the currents created by your presence. Cant aim them at the nobles or the priests. Kaménai, outside the mountain, protected. By the contours of the equations. Wouldnt aim it at themselves anyway.

But their subjects …

His words are, vast and vague, falling from his mouth like lumps of coal. The dancing needles in his brain move with precision, certainty, faster and sharper than he could ever catch.

But who?

Again he feels the wall around him the paralysing pressure. No movement, no speech, no choice. Of course, anyone with the knowledge to force the gods to obey would also be able to force them to remain silent.

So, its twenty questions, is it? he says fuzzily. The mouth the words come from seems so far away. Already hes sure his skull has been crushed, his whole self scattered under the weight of the Fallen.

Question one, who benefits?

Question two, says the Doctor, slowly and clearly. Who says a god, has to tell the truth?

A hundred thousand people in the empire, Alcestis tells Britomartis through her teeth. A hundred thousand lives to prolong. Who did you take it all from?

I should have seen the mistake for which you were, setting your course. Long before you got to this point. I didnt intervene enough once you returned.

Answer me!

Yes, for that I blame myself.

Britomartiss voice is cool over the wind. Alcestis can feel no tension in the womans body, even though Alcestiss arms and legs enfolded around her are all that keep her from plummeting to the ocean. Her calmness only drives Alcestis harder, her anger drawing sharp whiplash curves through the sky.

We know about Glaucus. About the other princes.

I have no need to justify myself.

We know about the blessing ceremonies. What the Fallen give must be taken from others.

You would judge me?

Everyone would.

Britomartis turns to look at her, over her shoulder. Her eyes speak of weapons as yet unused. By the end, you will know better.

Alcestis grips her heart tight in her chest, trying to keep it from pounding out of control. Trying to ride her fury with the same instinctive care with which she rides the currents. If shes going to crack Britomartiss composure, shell have to strike with care.

You wouldnt hide the act so thoroughly if you had no doubt.

I remember your childlike eyes, the day I first presented you to the gods. It was like your first taste of honey. You embraced the sweetness, with no concept of what it truly meant to serve them.

She reaches back, touches Alcestiss head, a gesture she remembers

from thirty years ago. Running her fingers proprietarily through Alcestiss mass of hair. Alcestis swerves sharply, twisting her head away.

Britomartis goes on. I keep the truth from the people not out of shame, but out of pity. I protect them from the damage the knowledge would do to those who arent prepared. It is the duty of each of us to care for our fellows …

Oh, I know, youll make sure I get all the care I need. You cared for me. Never about me. Never about Glaucus.

I care for the empire. And now, you know how. My pity for you is rapidly being exhausted.

Now, the equations whirling through his head are, his own: dynamic forces, balances of power, the push and pull of the nobles who could command the attacks. Britomartis, already using the gods for the Kings own sacrifices but a servant at heart, one who asks the gods rather than commands. Nauplius, grasping for power and influence, reaching for war … but resisting the involvement of the gods. Peneleos, the one who has most directly called for the gods to be unleashed, but with no apparent ambition beyond maintaining the status quo. Who benefits?

Well, none of them, says the Doctor. Not like the way you benefit. Youre doing it yourselves.

Their irritation pins him to the floor, like a butterfly pressed down by a finger. He struggles to find a breath.

Well, he wheezes. That was a good guess, wasnt it?

They whirl now along the cliff-face of Thera, Alcestis spinning the pair of them wildly as she pushes straight up along the rocks. Fighting the currents, the sudden strong down-draft from the volcano. Rock and sky flash past their eyes over and over.

How many people? she shouts. How many did you kill for the empire? Britomartis turns her head to look at her. Wars have causalities. You fight a war against our own people? Feed our men their own brothers? (A querulous look.) Certainly not. What do you take me for? (A pause.) They came from Athens. The tribute? You expect me to believe that seven youths and seven maidens Is your grasp really so

narrow? When I say the years came from Athens, I mean they came from Athens. Slowly now, a mile above the island, Alcestis trailing to a stop in the air as the words wash over her.

The whole city?

The half of them. The plague that swept Athens, that ended the last war. You remember, dont you?

She remembers standing in the palace portico as young Philonis ran barefoot up, to her, calling out that the boats were, back at long last. Excited babble about a surrender and a famine and the end of the siege of Athens, and the wave of relief that had washed over her.

You? The plague was a winged one. We let the Fallen go forth and descend upon them.

She feels her grip beginning to slacken, and redoubles it. The ease and certainty with which she held the currents has deserted her. Shes overbalancing in the air, losing her sense of up, and down. If she loses her hold on the currents, there will be nothing left to do but fall.

Even the children?

And their childrens children, and all the children they would now, never have. All those years came to us by right of conquest, through the gods.

For a moment she feels a knot untying in her stomach. Not Minoans, not her own people; foreigners, outside the law, far away across the water.

Then its as though she hits a wall. Men killed not with swords, not with rocks or javelins, fighting to defend their women and their homes, but turned in an instant to diseased and crumbling powder. No songs. No funerals. No-one to remember them at all.

She stood on the palace docks the day their men returned. The war had never reached Thera, but she cheered their return, all alive.

She cries out: We were never in danger from Athens! Not then!

You think not?

The war was for justice, not survival.

They are implacably opposed to our way of life. To our prosperity, to our law, to everything we value. I would defend our world with any means at my disposal.

They arent barbarians

Britomartis cuts her off. The Athenians worship children. They cast Rhea Herself aside to kneel at the feet of her upstart son. They would rise up against her, against us. And while Rhea would stand with her children to overthrow her tyrant husband, she will not allow herself to be overthrown in turn.

And so you do this in her name? You think she would approve?

Britomartis smiles. Do the crops still flower? Are the bulls still strong? Do Minos and Rhadamanthys, and their children still prosper? Then you have your answer.

Your answer is in the thunder of the hooves.

She feels, rather than sees, Britomartiss eyes. Be careful which answer you listen for. Do you remember when we unleashed the gods?

How could I?

Because you did it.

She stares, not in disbelief, in simple incomprehension.

Britomartis turns in her grip, bringing her mouth up, to Alcestiss ear. Three weeks before the return. The victory prayer.

She remembers it: all the priestesses crammed into the peak sanctuary, whirling through the dance while Britomartis led the chant of a ritual they had never heard before. On and on for hours, intoxicated by the nearness of the Titans, following her own footsteps over and over till her mind lost any sense of time. That day, she had been intimate with the divine. For just a moment, the earth had no hold on her.

Youre saying that I …

It was your minds that freed the gods to strike. The dance that let them take flight.

She stumbles, with no ground beneath her feet. Theres nothing to catch her as she tumbles forward. Her grip loosens, unthinking, but Britomartis has grabbed onto her just as fiercely, refusing to let go.

I didnt know … It doesnt change what you did. Theyre there before her eyes again, turning into filthy ash. I wouldnt have!

Britomartis shakes her head, blunt, certain. Remember the dance. Your clarity in the midst of it. If Id told you then, you would still have known it was right. You wouldnt have stopped.

Shes reeling now, spinning end over end, the blood crushing her inside her head.

Youve felt the life flow through you on the blessing-days. Youve seen the joy on the faces of the people. You all but demanded to be let back into the gods presence, but to do that, you must know, your part in it. You must face what they do, and know, that it is good.

Theres an avalanche thundering under his skin, unstoppable, a gloating certainty.

Hes almost crushed beneath it. The bulls will keep on coming, and eventually Rhadamanthys will have to send the Fallen to fight them. The last, time the gods were, let out on a leash, they learned how to slip it. Never again, will they be imprisoned.

And Alcestis paper-thin, a leaf in their hurricane.

He forces himself back up, on his hands, tries to plant his feet, ends up spread-eagled again, a fraction closer to the door. Head throbbing with a certainty that he cant stand.

Dont underestimate Alcestis, he tells them out loud. Shes made of steel.

Something laughs at the anachronism, buzzing its way down his spine. Of bronze, then. If you kill me, shell come for you. Ive been teaching her more than just bull leaping …

A thousand horrors burn through his head: her deaths by fire, by wind, by sea, stone or time. But only here, he reminds himself. Only near the sanctuary can the gods reach them. Where the equations balance to zero. Keep her away and they cant touch, her.

He fights his way up, onto one elbow, turns back to the burning rim. Theres no need for this, he says. Let me help you, you can go in peace …

Their laughter forces his face down against the floor, as though

pushing it into a page of sums. As the flood of patterns swells again, he screws his eyes shut, but theres no way to stop seeing once the horrors are, past your eyes.

You still think you can end this? shouts Britomartis. Make the world shine through your childs eyes once again, Every man, woman and child in the empire has drunk deeply of the blood youve ladled out to them. It has become their life. Will you now, take it from them?

With a howl Alcestis doubles over, hurls herself downwards, riding the down-draft headfirst towards the island. The wind tears at her eyes, tries to rip the skin from her back, but she pushes herself even faster.

And Britomartis goes on barking in her ear. Thats the last bit of growing up you need to do: to learn that every gift we have for ourselves is built on pain. And that no matter how much you whimper, you wont give those gifts up.

The ground of Thera is spinning up, beneath them. No matter how hard she turns, Britomartis will not shake loose. There are, only moments of life left, and she twists herself towards the cliffs overlooking Kaménai, aiming right for the edge, and as the rocks hurtle towards their heads, she gives her answer in a final shriek.

You did this!

With a dull crump Britomartis is ripped from her grasp, and there are rocks shearing past her belly as she plummets onward, till she finally pulls away and spirals upward over the ocean, her momentum running down to nothing, her cries fading to the endless keening wail of a seabird.

They push the numbers through his mind, or his mind through the numbers hes not sure which. The questions run faster and faster, figures spiralling upwards, potential temporal energy bursting outwards

 all the death and disaster, forced aside for so many years, breaking free.

The volcano, erupts, as it should have erupted. The island, is gutted. Akrotiri is buried under ash and stone. The sky is carpeted with soot, locking out the sun.

Doomsday has arrived.

The gods wont stop the helter-skelter of mathematics tearing through the Doctors consciousness. They are, too gleeful, painting him pictures of the islands inevitable destruction, hauling his struggling mind above, the numbers into their own incomprehensible raw perceptions, like an amoeba crammed with quantum mechanics.

He crawls out of the shrine, blind eyes screaming full of universes.

They dont want him to go; they cant reach much beyond their sanctuary. Hes got to get more distance between him and them. He cant lift himself up and he cant see or hear and hes not even sure which way is up; theres no way he can make it back down the path. Much more of this and hell be mad or dead, the centres of his brain melted like ice in a cup of hot tea.

He pulls himself along with his fingertips, clawing them into the earth until they find empty space. With a violent lunge he propels himself over the edge and into sanity and silence

Finally Alcestis goes back to the body, and sits rocking in a ball for a while.

She has to nerve herself to touch, Britomartiss remains. The way shes landed, on her side, with arms and legs all skewed, she looks like a sacrificial offering on the altar of the rocks. The moonlight is just barely bright enough for her to see how Britomartiss head had been pulped by the impact. Alcestis turns away to retch, but her throat is too tight for anything to escape.

Finally she gathers herself enough to push the body the few feet to the edge. It disappears into the darkness without a sound. Then she stands, herself on the same rocks, arms spread out, and falls forward, following the body. Perhaps a hundred feet down she lets the currents spare her, and carry her home.

He lies on the path, unwilling to stir. The fall from the ridge to the first switchback of the path below was not great, perhaps twenty feet or so, but his return to consciousness was slow. Down here hes beyond their reach, but he can still feel the emptiness in his head, where they pushed him aside to make space. It reverberates with an all-encompassing sense of something precious lost.

He drags himself to his feet, reeling like a blinded man, and stumbles his way home.

She tries to tell herself that she didnt mean to do it. She knows she

did. She tells herself that Britomartis deserved it. Oh Goddess, how Britomartis deserved it.

To be harried to the ends of the earth, repelling every creature she meets as they see the stain of guilt across her.

When Alcestis reaches the palace on Kaménai, she lurches to the ground in the courtyard, then pads silently through the portico towards her room, a moonlit ghost in blood-and-bone silks.

The Doctor is a heap on his bed. Arms tangled across him, one bony elbow sticking up, cheeks thin over his skull. For a moment he looks like Britomartis did, and her mind just refuses to form any more thoughts of any kind.

Then he moves his head, a blind man following a sound. She sits on the floor against the bed, her knees up, to her chin, her head close to where his lies. Neither has the strength to touch.

She deserved it, she says, her

voice weak. He shakes his head slowly,

She killed

so many … She killed blankly.

so many, and who am I to say my Theyre so big.

hands are, clean? Who am I to And there are, so many of them.

judge? All towering

over me from the

She shakes her head, too drained inside.

even to doubt. Who am I

to I can be tiny in the ocean and be

judge? Im anyone. Anyone can at home. But

Oceanus didnt just

judge. show me the ocean, he was ocean.

But then I have the strength to Every ocean Ive ever seen, and carry it out. Ive

seen so many.

Yes. Which means in their eyes, Thats the trouble with I have the

right. polytheism, youre

outnumbered …

Yes. If they want a world where they can put their own law aside, and have justice lie down before strength, then they must accept that their strength must lie down before mine.

With a cringing shudder he pulls his eyes away from whatever he alone can see, then focuses blinking on her. Sorry, he says, his voice a ragged croak. Did I just miss something vital?

But its too much to repeat, and she lets the thought grow cold and hard inside her. Now, she tells him about the victory prayer, about what she did, and the words come out flat and lifeless.

He hunches his body over in the bed, bending to meet her gaze. Im so sorry, his eyes say, and say it eloquently, but theres no reaction on her own face. When he actually has to mouth the words, Im so sorry, its like an admission of defeat.

He has no strength for anything more. His head sinks sideways to the bed, his eyes drift closed.

What do I do? she asks.

There are, ways to live with it.

Im not living with it, Im dead with it.

That too shall pass, he says faintly.

A hundred thousand people, she cries. How would you know,? His eyes open just a hair, and all she can see in them is the dead white. Believe me, he says, in the raw tone she now, knows from her own mouth.

The eyes drift shut again, and the words start flowing out more freely. A polished answer now, almost a glib one. Time is fire, when I stop it burning in one place it spreads to another. A decision I make tonight could affect whole civilisations thousands of years hence. It happens everywhere I act. Empires live and cities die in the spaces between my thoughts, all unseen. Ive killed far more people than I could ever know about.

How can you deal with it?

I cant, he says, almost gently. You cant either.

Now, shes feeling. Her bodys betraying her, curling inwards and shrivelling like a leaf in a fire.

He goes on. Its not the sort of thing you deal with. Compensate for, perhaps, like a man with an arm cut off. Or an old man whose memory has gone. You find a way to live without the part of you that you had before the part that was sure of your innocence. But to deal with is to resolve, and Im no good at resolutions. Just at moving on to the next moment.

But its so big …

He can only nod. They are.

And its too big to think, waves crashing over her head, and all she can do is reach up, to his face, her fingers through his hair, and try to pull him to look at her from inches away. Im falling, she whispers. Catch me.

I cant.

So her voice cracks, spilling out all the anger and ugliness she always knew was in there. You brought me here. Put me up, so high. How can you turn me into this and make me face this and then just drop me?

Youre looking for absolution, I cant give it. Its not my place, this isnt my world. Im not the one who suffered. I can give you an ear, a word, a shoulder, sympathy, companionship, magic tricks … but I cant be the one to forgive you.

She laughs, a choked sob. Whos left to forgive me? The children wholl never be born? The survivors who watched their friends burn to the ground?

He just lies there, shaking his head, a tiny bony creature. She feels herself falling again, plummeting through the floor. Even the gods wouldnt forgive me. Why would I need forgiveness for their moment of freedom?

Oh dont worry. The gods hate you, but its nothing personal.

Its not possible, not possible at all. But he wont stop. They hate you like you hate mosquitoes, or a stuck door. They hate all their gaolers. And theyre ready to scour you and all your empire from the face of the earth.

She hesitates before she speaks. Not because she doesnt know, what to say; the thought is already there unbidden. Not because she has any doubt about it; just a faint feeling that perhaps she should have doubt.

But she searches for it, and cant find it, and lets the words out.

We deserve it.

No you dont, he says, but too fast for him to have thought about it. She turns, leaning her chin on the bed inches from his face, and repeats: We deserve it.

Now, he opens his eyes, realising she means it, that this isnt just idle despair.

Theyll turn your island, to ash. Rain fire down on the guilty and the innocent alike

There are no innocent. Everyone in the empire is living on stolen time.

They didnt know

Neither did I!

So let yourself off the

It doesnt change anything, it has happened. Weve all profited from the crime.

Everyone from the King, to the lowliest slave. Every farmer, every sailor, every whore, every infant. We all have to pay.

It would be a slaughter.

It would be just.

Its never just anything.

Hes struggling up, on one elbow as he talks, trying to reach her. Releasing them would be only the beginning. Theyre a completely unchecked force.

We already have an unchecked force in the palace. The gods are the only ones who can bring any kind of justice

Theyre no more the ones to judge or forgive than I am. Thats something for you to work out among yourselves

It wont happen! she cries. And shes filled with rage at him for fooling her for so long, for making her believe in something better. She whirls to her feet, pacing and shouting. I know, just what these people are. Well do anything without thinking about it. Thats what led me into the dance. Thats why it all needs to end.

No.

He glares at her, and she realises its taking every bit of his strength. His eyes are, still fiery, but hes so battered he cant even sit up.

Theres another way. Ive been finding it all my life …

And she stands, there, a laugh freezing inside her, as she feels the last scales fall from her eyes. How old are, you? she whispers.

He just looks at her, lost.

All these lives youve led … who has died to keep you in them? How

many souls has it taken to keep you acting like a child? How old are you?

And she can see the years behind his eyes. Im afraid Ive lost count. She sees nothing more to say. She stalks to the door, ignoring his calls to her, and throws herself into the sky till the island, is far behind.

Four: Stone

Midnight, the Doctor in his forge, face lit only by the fire as he weighs the chunk of iron in his hands.

The inventions that Rhadamanthys needs could be fashioned out of bronze; theyre more or less within the range of contemporary technology, so his sense of guilt is minimal. He has just finished pounding out a large flat sheet, ready to be reheated and bent into the appropriate shape. But the things he requires for his own purposes will take more than the Bronze Age can provide.

Already hes driven the smiths from this forge, with Rhadamanthyss blessing, to protect his craftsmans mysteries and to hide the changes he has made to raise the temperature in the furnace. So now, he works alone. He moves slowly now, leaning heavily to support quavering legs: his face and chest streaked with grime from his labours, his body still not fully recovered.

The charcoal bed rests among the flames, ready for alloying. Even a glimpse of this secret could give Minoss empire an unchallengeable edge, weapons of a strength that could throw all of history off balance.

But if hes going to face the gods, or even Alcestis, hes going to need steel.

He casts the iron into the forge, and lets it play with the fire.

Midnight, Alcestis at her kiln in Akrotiri. With no clearer idea of what to do, she has returned home, to lose herself in the motion of her potters wheel. Now she hovers over the vent in the top of the kiln, her eyes fixed through the heat-haze on the batch of cups inside, watching as the fire sears away their last traces of softness. Wonders how long it would take to make a thousand cups, ten thousand, a hundred

thousand.

This will pass, she tells herself again. This will pass. This isnt the first time in her life shes felt so sick about the world that she wants it all to erase itself.

Its just a moment, it will ease.

A thousand cups would cover the floor around the kiln. Ten thousand wall her in, her own hands endlessly shaping more. A hundred thousand blot out the sky, bury her alive, no way to move, no way even for a moment to end.

A thousand cups. Ten thousand. A hundred thousand.

If the soldiers come for her, she has faith in her ability to vanish. Its all she has faith in now.

At the marketplace, Pelopia has welcomed her, back into the fold. Like everyone here, she has no idea of the name of the colourful bird who has been saving them from the bulls. She bustles round her stall, arranging her linens artfully. Oh, youre well away from that one, let me tell you. Hes a beauty all right, and they never last.

I thought I was a beauty. You said so.

Well, thats different.

So was he. At least I thought so.

Oh, I know, how all the poems go, chuckles Pelopia. Milky-white skin, a high ivory forehead, a neck like polished marble … Well, milk curdles, dearie, and marble cracks with age. Even here.

Alcestis moves an amphora a handspan to the right, then back to the left. In the light of day, it was likely he hadnt known where his youth came from, any more than she had known. But, either way, shell have to work this out away from his eyes, his words. Even if he was guilty, shed still end up believing him. And she still feels the cinder in her stomach from the moment when he had refused her the comfort or answers she needed.

He taught me a lot, she says.

Ill just bet he did, cackles the weaver.

No, no … Do you know, what I found out? I found out the source of

all our blessings. Our riches and our long, long lives.

Rhea, of course.

Alcestis looks up, at the weaver. In a manner of speaking.

Pelopia is troubled by the look on her face, busies herself with dusting a display.

What are, you getting at, girl?

We stole it all from Athens. We killed them and took the remaining years of their lives. The gods did, at our command.

Well, we were at war with them.

Alcestis stares at her. This isnt the same as conquering a land and carrying off tribute. We took their lives.

Well, how is it any different? (Alcestis says nothing.) Its a shame, I suppose.

But thats the price you pay in war. Besides, the Athenians dont place the same value on human life as we do after all, they do have less of it! Theyd have done the same thing to us, if the gods had been on their side.

I cant believe it, thinks Alcestis. The terrible secret, the awful revelation, and her fellow Theran barely batted an eyelid.

She tries again, with Nisus, young Nisus the big hero of the fourth attack. The uncertain days have worn him down; hes lost weight, and there are furrows under his eyes. He tells her shes lost her mind.

She confronts the lay preachers, shouting back at them, telling the truth about their gods. In moments they pick up her cries, turn them about. Its all just confirmation of what theyve been saying all along: everyone else is guilty. The truth is soon washed away in the torrent of their words.

Neleus the innkeeper is already drunker than any of his customers. He doesnt dismiss her, but nods sagely, grumbling under his breath. Something in his glazed eyes tells her, that he believes her, he finds it all too easy to believe. But its so frightening, he can barely move. He just shakes his head, and goes on shaking it as she walks around the inn, forcing her, message on them. Dont any of them understand?

How can life just go on?

She stumbles outside and stares around the marketplace, at all the women and children. Are they all the same? Not even bothering to feel defensive, no longer even thinking about how frightened and angry they are? Would any of them even think of the women and children of Athens? Of the men who watched their families die and watched their own limbs shrivel? Would any of them even wonder who fed the blessing ceremonies in the years before Athens people now, so destroyed that they cant even be named?

Oh, she knows what they feel: shes felt it herself. Hates the taste of it in her, mouth. She had always been able to go on because she knew there was nothing else, she could do. A glib, comforting bitterness, the protection of knowing youre powerless in the face of it all. Even now, she feels it: the rock-hard certainty that, for all her rage, theres nothing, nothing she can do to shift the balance and bring it all crashing down. But now, its a horror rather than a balm.

The Doctors awakened her, turned that intolerable numbness into an even more intolerable fire. Sent her out of control. Her insides twist even tighter. How could he force open her eyes with no regard for what she would see?

In her minds eye, she sees the crowd falling like grain before a scythe, the space becoming empty as bodies pile on the paving. Thats how it would have been in Athens: the swift poison of unleashed immortals, slurping up years. In one moment, the picture of dead Minoans puts peace in her, heart; the symmetry, the justice: the stolen years stolen back. In the next, she sees their faces, sees them pale in the dust with empty eyes, and she cannot tell Athens and Akrotiri apart.

Thats why the bulls are coming, she whispers.

Of course it is. (Pelopia puts an arm around her, shoulders.) They hate everything about us. Serve them right if there was another plague. Could help with the war.

Shes aware shes shaking, she feels Pelopia inching her, arm back towards her, stall. I know, I know, the hag is crooning, gently. Itd be lovely to go back, to when we thought the world was safe and we could afford to be nice. But weve learned better now, dearie, and thats what matters.

And she has.

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Deucalion slips away from his bodyguard while down at the Kaménai docks. Hes spotted Perdix just around the bend in the island, looking out to sea from the ridge of black rock, and has to go to him.

He hasnt had a chance to talk to Perdix, not properly, since the night he cried. The next morning, he sneaked out to reach their room, but outside their door was a flock of flapping servants, saying that Perdix was deathly ill and Alcestis had gone in search of distant help. Apparently she had taken Britomartis with her as well, perhaps for guidance. Eventually Perdix recovered enough for the lessons to begin again,, but always under the watchful eyes of others. And throughout it all, Deucalion has been kept busy with a whirl of social crises, daily obligations and warnings of threat not giving him any time to remember that anything was ever any different.

So now hes found Perdix alone, gazing out to sea through the gap in the circle of Thera staring at the horizon as if he stood on his toes he might just be able to peer over it. Deucalion knows the expression; hes seen it on Glaucus as he gazed out of the window during a council session: a flattened longing for any place that wasnt this one.

Ah, Deucalion, says Perdix faintly. Its good to have you here.

He looks untouched. His skin is still impossibly pale and smooth, his face no older.

But hes leaning heavily on a carved stick, and Deucalion can see the tightness in his arm muscles as they support his weight. Hes fighting to keep the shaking under control.

Deucalion looks at this old body hidden under this young mans skin, and wonders if this is how he himself will look in a hundred years time. An egg thats gone off inside its perfect shell.

They sit together, on the volcanic rock, and for the first time ever, Deucalion can talk. I didnt ask for this, he says.

Well of course you didnt. I can hardly imagine someone who would. Well, I suppose I can, I mean Ive met them, like your father, but somehow that still doesnt mean I can imagine them, you know, what I mean?

Deucalion likes the way Perdix looks at him just then. Hes talking like hes just another person, not a grown-up.

Perdix has in his hand a pile of stone chips, the black and grey rock of the Kaménai volcano. He keeps tossing them out into the bay, trying to skip them across the water, but he doesnt have the knack; his hands have too much tremor in them. Stone after stone hits the surface and disappears, even the ripples vanishing in the chop of the water.

How could he do it? asks Deucalion.

For the empire. For himself. I suppose if you stare at the two long enough its possible to lose the difference.

Another stone vanishes with the others. Perdix tells him what his father did to Athens, and Deucalion feels little more than a sort of numb acceptance. Glaucuss crumbling face is still so raw in his memory that multiplying it by tens of thousands of faces just seems like the next logical step. Perdix goes on to tell him about the gods, the senders of the bulls, and even that great betrayal simply seems obvious in retrospect.

So many … whispers Deucalion. He cant even look at Perdix. I should have …

Died?

Tried something …

Same thing.

Perdix steeples his hands, and rests his chin on them, looking out to sea. Ive had to see things happen, let them happen … even make them happen … because I knew at that moment there was no other way.

And people died?

Oh yes.

But it wasnt your fault, Deucalion says shakily. You didnt ask for it. And you didnt have to do it yourself, did you?

Perdixs eyes look sideways, weighing Deucalion. Deucalion shivers, as if Perdix can see straight through his question to the fear beneath: the thin hope that, so long as theres some bit of distance between him and the crimes committed around him, hes not damned.

Perdix, old and weary, answers Mostly, not. Suddenly even having a chance at hope seems like such a precious luxury. A question for you,

continues Perdix, his voice returning to something like his old tutorial tone. Say you know, something infinitely bad is going to happen, whether or not you do anything. And you have the choice of refusing to take part, and dying for it, or taking part and trying to ease the horror down the road. Which is the lesser evil?

I suppose its better to live and do something, says Deucalion hoping that Perdix means his choice was the right one.

And if you can find a third choice? One thats less evil?

Well, then you should take it.

Even if its still about the third most evil thing in the world?

Deucalion blinks. Hed thought this was about making him feel better. But looking at Perdix, that doesnt seem to be whats on his mind at all. He keeps staring across to the clifftops of Thera, searching the skies.

I suppose, says Deucalion.

Now, Perdix turns, to look at him, his face childlike and serious. He nods slowly.

Yes, I suppose, too.

The look on Perdixs face leaves him even more unsteady. Somehow he always assumed, when Perdix was asking him and Glaucus all those questions, that Perdix knew the answers himself. And when he began to confide in him about his own complicity, he thought that meant Perdix knew a way to deal with it. When in fact all he had was the gift of still being there to be able to ask the questions.

And Perdix throws another stone, trying to make it skip, and it too vanishes into the bay. Now Deucalion sees the tightness and concentration in the muscles of his hand.

Hes training himself, Deucalion realises dragging his body back to fitness, struggling to be ready for whatever is going to happen.

So its better that Im alive, says Deucalion. He wonders how far he can take this.

And its better that Ive still got everything I have. It wasnt me who stole all the years, I didnt ask for it.

Perdix says nothing.

It was all before I was born. So theyre all long dead, so its all right for me to keep my years, isnt it? Its not like I could give them all back and make it all right

Wrong question, snaps Perdix.

Deucalion jumps. But Perdixs voice, while hard, is not angry. Perdix reaches out and turns Deucalions head, towards him, locking eyes with him.

Youve been given these gifts whether you like it or not. You cant give them back.

Not your wealth, not your food, not your life. All thats happened, the things youve done to get where you are, they cant be erased. The question is what do you do now youve got them?

Alcestis on the hillside, turning over a stone. Its heavy enough that she has to put her, back into it, lifting with both hands. After a moment, she lets out a frustrated breath and simply wrenches herself and the stone up, off the ground.

A thousand things crawl out from beneath the rock. Alcestis tosses the stone aside and watches them. A moment later, she is in amongst the creeping, slithering population, scraping at the loose soil with her, hands. Grit lodges under her, fingernails as she hollows out a hole in the dirt.

She pushes the flying costume into it, folding and scrunching until she has forced all the cloth into the ground. Then she lifts the stone back up, again, using just her own strength this time, feeling the strain in her wrists and the centre of her back, and slams it back down into place.

Damn them. They can fall into Tartarus for all she cares. Shes been wrong to stop the bulls, wrong to get in the way of justice. Let the fire demons scour the island, clean.

He tells Deucalion:

Every gift costs as much as it gives. Do you know, how the gods give you four harvests in a year? By borrowing them from the future. Every year of plenty means several of barrenness in the centuries to come. The gods have power over wind and water, sun and stars, even time itself but they can only rearrange, not really change. The earth tremors that the grown-ups speak of … youve never felt one?

Thats because theyve all been pushed into the future. Deferred for as long as they can keep the gods at bay.

(He turns, raises his eyes to the steep slope behind them, to the point above, where the trees shrivel from the heat.) But it wont last, forever.

And when the gods do break free, all the earthquakes and eruptions will be unleashed at once. All the stronger for their deferral.

The explosion will erase Kaménai from the world. Bury Akrotiri under the remains of its sister island. For four days there will be no sun, as the volcano hurls wave after wave across the land: first rock, then sulphurous windstorms, then lava, then acid thunderclouds. A sky so thick and gritty that no bird can fly.

Three thousand people will be caught at the harbour, scalded alive as they try to beg and bribe their way onto any boat. But with all the ships here, in the trading centre of the world, there will never be enough. The few who escape will look back to see a plume of smoke, thirty times the size of the island, and give thanks … until the tsunamis come, and wipe their boats from the surface of the sea.

And even that wont be the end. The empire will limp along, even for another generation, until a great swarm of men from the north overrun Knossos. And these men?

Another payment deferred. Had the gods not been unleashed, the last war would have gone quite differently Athens would have finally united the neighbouring city-states to push you back to your own palace gates. The gods mangling of time has separated the two, but the effect will remain, even though the cause has been crushed. Minoss empire will be overrun by ghosts, destroyed by the people whom they made no longer exist.

Tears, now,? Oh, theres always time for those. But the question to ask is, what will you do to ease the changes to come? If this is what you expect, what will you do that they wont expect?

(And he raises his hand to the waters of the bay, and points, to where all the chips of pumice hes thrown are, slowly floating back to the island, like ducklings following their mother bobbing on the surface in a most unstonelike way.) Payment deferred: Rhadamanthys finds the Doctor inching alone through the palace colonnade. The Kings face is a quiet rumble of thunder. Theyve found Britomartiss body, Rhadamanthys tells him. Some fishermen caught her, in their nets, near the foot of the Thera cliffs.

Im sorry.

No. (Rhadamanthyss words whip-crack across the Doctors back.) You wont be. Not where anyone can hear.

The Doctor stops short, and Rhadamanthys moves ahead of him, his eyes pinning the Doctor.

Britomartis has of course ascended to become a goddess. For the public, this is a time to rejoice. The matter of her old body can be dealt with unobtrusively. And the matter of her killer shall remain unaddressed … so long as Alcestis continues to defeat the demons.

I see, sire.

What do you see? Tell me.

That justice can be tempered with expediency.

Rhadamanthys shakes his head. Without Alcestis as a symbol, the people will feel defenceless. That is reason enough to defer justice, if not to tip the scales forever. Were she to shirk her duties, though, then we would have no reason not to hunt her down … or to keep her name secret any longer. And no person in the empire would shelter her once they knew shed turned her back on them.

And if, in the end, the demons defeat her?

Then it will be a tragedy for the empire … but still justice will have been done.

So her ability is her sentence.

If you wish to see it that way.

You declare her guilt quite boldly. As a judge, you clearly have the courage of your convictions

Rhadamanthys cuts him off, harshly. No one else, could have taken Britomartis off the island, to those cliffs unnoticed.

The Doctor falls silent; clearly nonsense will not serve him now. Rhadamanthys can no more be distracted than a charging bull. He paces in front of the Doctor, lecturing him like an errant pupil. Now, you may have had a part in this murder but if you were guilty, you would not have stayed. All that could keep you here is innocence

some of which Im sure you have, though not nearly so much as you pretend or some more important aim. Whether the former or the latter, though, youve still earned the same offer I have just made to Alcestis.

Im afraid I lack her skill at fighting demons.

Of course you do. And youve found no-one else who has it either … not that I expect you to find such a replacement now, as Im sure you believe that would sign her death warrant. But you are an inventor, a man of knowledge. Your talent is unquestionable, unlike your loyalties. I tell you now, that you may keep your place here, so long as your inventions prove useful against the bulls.

And you shall have them. I have one nearly ready, which will allow you to identify their perpetrator.

And if you can ease conditions within the palace as well, all the better.

The Doctor lowers his head. I can but try, sire.

Then we understand each other.

As I said, Im sorry, begins the Doctor, but the King has turned his back on him and is stalking away.

Still the Doctor speaks quietly. You must have loved her very much.

Rhadamanthyss back stops short. When he turns, his face is contorted, but harder than ever. He answers: And your heart must be broken indeed, now she has turned her back on you.

He turns, and disappears into the palace, and the Doctor stands, uneasy on his stick.

The bull comes with the dawn. Alcestis has been awake for hours, feeling it coming closer, like a sea storm.

The cries of panic begin, and stranger sounds, noises shes come to recognise as buildings crumbling with age. She lies back down on the bed, but the sounds carry clear through the air.

She pulls on her dress, her ordinary clothes, and lets herself float up, from the doorway to gain a view of the bulls work. Immediately she

can see the grey channel it has cut through the buildings, connecting three streets in a swathe of powder. And theres the red-black shape of the monster itself, tossing its head, as it tramples and throws the ones who arent quick enough to get out of the way. From the shattered buildings rise moans and cries, for help.

Alcestis shoots down towards the bull. The wind whips across her, bare arms and snatches the breath from her, face. She comes at it faster and faster until she almost touches its burning skin, and then rebounds away like a ball thrown against a wall, back into the sky.

The bull raises its boulder of a head, to squint up at her. Then it lowers it again, smashing into a wall. The masonry comes down like rain, revealing a dozen people whove stupidly tried to shelter behind it.

Alcestis repeats her approach, snapping in close enough almost to touch the bull.

Before she can shoot away again, it turns suddenly, one of its horns snagging in the hem of her, dress.

She screams and tears loose, the fabric unravelling to her knees. Another inch and it would have impaled her leg, and that would have been an end to her.

She climbs upwards, frantically, the bull following in a cloud of seething air. She can smell its sulphur breath, its magma sweat. A bellow erupts from its brute face.

Alcestis zigzags suddenly, changing directions, knowing that the bull will be slow to turn and follow. She has only to out-run it. But it turns so fast! and gallops after her. Its hooves pound ridiculously at the air, but its bulk moves swiftly, like a dolphin through water. She should be leaving it behind, but its getting closer.

Half panicked, she climbs upwards again. Perhaps its too heavy to go so high?

Perhaps it will turn back to its real target, the island?

Beneath her, the ocean fills everything. Thera is a round shape below, and between her and her home, the swelling, sizzling shape of the bull, hurling itself upwards after her.

Alcestis realises she is panting. She looks up. Can she lose it in the

clouds? She feels as though she will shake to pieces. The sky is blackening, turning into a narrow tunnel above, that suddenly squeezes shut, and shes

Falling! Shes falling!

She falls right past the bull, which gives an almost human snort of astonishment.

Shes gasping, her head is pounding, and her hands and feet are terribly cold.

Somehow she gathers her strength, turns, the fall into a dive, slowing enough that when she hits the sea she enters it smoothly, her hands out in front of her. She travels in a deep curve through the cold weight, lifting herself out and into the air, her hair and dress heavy with water.

The bull strikes the water almost at that instant. Steam explodes upward in a great jet, showering her with hot water. Beneath her, the ocean boils like soup in a pot.

The bull does not emerge again. The cold ocean has swallowed up, the last, of its energy. She watches for long minutes, but all that comes up, are, dead fish, floating on their sides in the seething water.

Alcestis slaps at her, own face, sobs coming like yelps. She couldnt do it. She couldnt stand by while the bull ran down the crowd. And it nearly killed her. She cant trust the Doctor, she cant trust her own people, she cant trust even herself.

But she has to do something to stop it all.

She hauls herself through the air, back towards the land. The taste of salt lingers in her mouth, like blood.

On the hilltop, she unearths her flying clothes. Now, its Alcestiss dress that she leaves scattered by the cliff-edge, as if its occupant has shed it and jumped. She brushes the biggest pieces of dirt from the silk as she bakes dry in the days heat, then abandons the task as the need to move on builds up, in her, a current she cannot fight.

Dirt-stained, salt-encrusted, hair wild in the wind, she sets off like an arrow for Kaménai.

Come to the edge, says the Doctor. Ive got things to show you.

Rhadamanthys steps warily out onto the roof. The Doctor points the way with his walking-stick; the King, notices that hes using the stick now for emphasis rather than support. Almost without thinking, he widens the distance between them.

Near the edge stand two objects. He shields his eyes from the first: a small chip of crystal, the size of a babys fist, resting on the plaster roof and burning with the orange heat of an afternoon sun.

A crystal from the sanctuary walls, explains the Doctor; he had a priestess fetch it for him. He tells the King, how he charged it with the timefire released by the disintegration of this mornings demon. It is a fire that will not go out, like the faint glow in the sanctuary multiplied by a thousand. You can use it to light the darkness, or keep the kitchen fires burning forever, or invent the jacuzzi for all I care.

And you can make more of them? asks Rhadamanthys.

As many as they send demons, replies the Doctor.

The other gift is set up, on the very edge of the roof, overlooking the courtyard below and facing the slope of the volcano. It stands, on a crude wooden tripod, a tapering bronze tube with a curved piece of glass at each end.

Come here, says the Doctor, motioning him to the precipice. Look through the narrow end.

Rhadamanthys braces himself, then peers through the small glass. Inside he sees the top of the volcano large and clear enough to see the doorway on the peak sanctuary.

Incredible, he says, his free hand reaching out to touch, the distant building in front of him. An army gifted with the ability to see their enemys movements from far away To spy unobserved … You have given us foresight in bronze and glass. This gift is truly beyond value.

And just below his feet, Alcestis is pressed against the side of the palace, held against the wall by the currents and her, fury. With each word she hears, she feels the scream of rage building in her, throat. Her fingers dig in as if to tear the wall right out from under them.

Is that what youd use it for? asks the Doctor.

And his stick lashes out and knocks a tripod leg away. The spyglass tips slowly over the edge.

Rhadamanthys lunges for it, but the Doctor catches it first his body between the King, and the glass, dangling his prize over the drop. The King grasps for it, but the Doctor backs away.

If you want to look through this thing, youre going to have to open your eyes first.

How dare you? rages the King.

Oh, I dare. I dare.

The Doctor wobbles dangerously as he dances along the edge with the King.

Rhadamanthys can see his arm shaking as he supports the weight of the tripod, but he holds it nonetheless.

Listen, Rhadamanthys. Ive tried patience, Ive tried eloquence, now Im trying something youll understand. If you threaten me any further, youll never see another fire crystal, and the glass will do what glass does best, namely shatter. Youll never know how to make another of either. Now, what I want from you is simple: the spyglass stays up here, with a man constantly watching the volcano. Have you got that?

Are you giving me an order? breathes the King.

Open your eyes. Ask me why I want you to do that.

Why?

So that when the next demon comes, theyll be able to tell you exactly where it came from.

From the volcano?

From the Fallen.

The King, slows, the fury on his face melting into disbelief.

The Doctor, speaks quietly now, persuasively. Youre a judge, you need evidence.

Thats what the glass is for. And the crystal. It glows from the demons just like it glows from the Fallen, only more so what does that suggest

to you?

He dances on the edge a moment more. The words settle on Rhadamanthys, begin to harden. Slowly he turns away, straining for thought.

The last, time you let them out, they learned how to slip their chains. Open the gate again and theyll devour the empire.

The King stands, taking this in. The Doctor brings the spyglass back to solid ground and busies himself with it, putting his stick down as he fusses with the tripod.

Now, poetically just as that may be, Im still giving you the chance to save your empire from the fate you inflicted on Athens.

With that, Rhadamanthys turns on him. You would blame me for that? For protecting my people?

I know, I know, the barbarians at the gate. Never mind the ones in the palace.

Rhadamanthys grabs his arms, pinning him to the spot. In a flash the Doctor returns the clasp: holding each other near the edge, such that neither can throw the other without being dragged down himself.

The Athenians needed to be stopped, declares Rhadamanthys. They killed Androgeos, and now Asterius. Two of my brothers own sons lost to their treachery.

The Doctors smile is barbed. Oh, I know, its personal. Its the oldest question of them all: what will you sacrifice for the children?

And with a hair-raising grin he skips to one side, dragging the King, with him over the edge.

Just as they tip too far, his trailing foot stamps against the roof, shoves them back towards safety. They fall tangled together. At once, the King pulls himself up, stares at the Doctor, paralysed with utter astonishment. The Doctor doesnt move from where he lies, suddenly cool in repose.

But to you, O father of your country, the question is: what do you expect the children to sacrifice for you?

The King stands, shaken on the roof of his palace. The truth freed

from Tartarus is too much to conceive of. As a man whose prayers have always taken the form of commands, he now finds himself wishing to entreat, to beg for aid; but he has no idea to whom he can direct these prayers.

Eventually he turns, and retreats into the building. The Doctor stays where he lies: insouciance now, revealed as exhaustion. Finally he reaches for his stick and begins to drag himself to his feet.

And the clawlike hand of Alcestis grabs his heel and yanks him off the edge. Her fury gives her the strength to whip him round by his ankle, a full half circle in the air.

But with that grip hes heavy and unwieldy shes sinking and tipping over as they spin.

He hits the wall halfway down. His arms break the impact, but she still feels the jolt straight through his body. Theres a gaping look of shock on his face. She sees it, and wants to swing him back and hit him again and again against the wall till the shock turns, to understanding.

How could you? she breathes.

Theyve sunk to the ground. His head, and arms hit first he tries to pull away from her using just his hands. She lets go of his foot and descends upon him, upon the aching astonishment and confusion on his face. Shes dirt-streaked and filthy and relentlessly wild.

How could you? she repeats. You stay in the house of a murderer, a killer a hundred thousand times over. You drink his wine, you give him your gifts, all for your own ends. You leave him untouched after all his crimes. How could you stand next to him?

How could you tell me you had anything to do with justice?

Shes trying to grab him, but cant quite reach him hes scrabbling away beneath her, along the polished stones of the courtyard.

Alcestis. Please. Its the only way

How could you stand next to me? How could you convince me I was something I wasnt?

He stumbles to his feet, hands flailing in search of anything to use against her.

Find your weapons where you can, she thinks furiously; we dont last long. Behind him a couple of palace onlookers stare openmouthed. Shes skimming just above the ground, closing in on him as he protests.

Please, listen, he says. Every word I said to you, I still believe. And just in case you got the wrong impression the other day, let me assure you that any life-energy I take from my companions is strictly metaphorical

A hand flashes towards her, striking at the pressure point in her neck. But shes ducked aside already, catching his wrist with one hand and pressing the other flat against his chest pinning him with his arm at full stretch.

Ive learned well, she says with a pointed smile. But with a twist of his shoulder he slithers out of her grip and backs away, giving her a nod and smile as acknowledgement. She charges at him again. But he cant be pinned down: he ducks each attack just as she dodges his. Theyre a flurry of colour and violent motion weaving across the courtyard neither able to land a blow.

Her words fly as fast as her arms, somehow not breaking her rhythm in the slightest.

You turn junk into inventions, people into heroes, yourself into something new every time I turn around. Monsters into dust. Cities upside down. You turned me into this.

But you wont expose the King, and turn him into a criminal?

Yes, yes, Im a founding member of the Society For Turning Things Into Other Things.

But I cant turn notes into music. I cant turn a broken thing into a whole one. Only patch it. Only push a bit in a new direction.

He seems secure on the defensive, as if this is his usual footing. But shes adapting to his style combining blows so that ducking one drives him into her next strike, not giving him a moment to take the advantage.

And thats your excuse for not facing it? she spits. Leaving the job half-done?

A hint of a grin. I dont do stable.

Fury lifts her. Her legs lash around in mid-air, her body horizontal as she kicks again and again at his head. Well, youre involved now. You changed me. And I wont let you escape me!

And she touches down just long enough to spring, and leaps straight over him. He ducks, but shes already caught the down-draft from the volcano, slamming her straight down onto him. She feels him fall, the rattle through his bones as he hits the ground, her feet stamping on flesh.

By the time he rolls to his feet, shes already high above him. Held against the wall three stories up,, head, down, watching him cast about looking for her. Hes shaking on his feet. Guarding himself now, only just realising what hes awakened.

She twists a smile. Not so quick now?

The gods took a lot of years from me, Im still growing them back …

As he smiles, shes already launched herself at him again. Headfirst, hands stretched into claws. She swoops through him he twists aside, no longer trying to counter-attack, just blocking and dodging what he can. Up the far wall of the courtyard, wheeling and banking, moving faster than his eye can follow.

No-one cares about justice, she shouts. Facing the consequences. No-one ever will.

He turns, on his heel, stumbling, trying to follow her, voice. Never?

All that weve lost. We used to walk with the gods …

Now, the gods, they do stable. If you want your empire levelled, your cities laid waste, they wont stop till theyve finished the job. Is that what you want?

I want it over! she shrieks. But she feels the fire about to consume her, and she directs it out into another rain of blows. Again she plummets. When she reaches him this time, she spirals ever closer, arms and legs lashing out non-stop. Reflexive rhythm, faster than she can think. None of us deserves to live. Weve lost our best qualities …

Yes, Im afraid you have. Youve lost your sense of possibility.

And he stops, his heel back against the wall of the council building. He keeps blocking her strikes, but his eyes and voice wont let her go.

Youd call that being disillusioned, but thats the final insult to what youve lost. The denial that you lost anything worth having. Theres no word for having lost a true vision, not an illusion, a real sense of what could be.

Their dance is so instinctive that she can forget it, the way she forgets shes breathing. In the middle of the motion she feels still. And as she hangs over the Doctor, trading blows and dodges by reflex, she can feel the disturbance in the currents that shes never noticed before: a wind that pulls you, rather than pushes you, into him. Theres a whirlwind confined inside his body.

Knowing youd lost your sight, that would be too painful to face. So you tell yourself your small hard-fought truth was a big lie, and run from it. You dont want to face the fact that some battles you can still win.

One last strike, trying to grab hold of him, to break through and shake her despair into him. And she catches him but at the same time, hes caught her, pinning her, close to him. His face fills her vision, his desperate conviction trying to jump the gap to her like a spark.

Listen to me.

Hold for a moment: being close to him is like the instant you overbalance in your chair, where youre not sure which way youll fall. Hes a possibility in the shape of a person.

But a hundred thousand souls are crowding in on her. They thunder through her veins, crying to be released. She wants to die but she wants the Doctor to save her but theres no way to save them, nothing can atone, the only hope he can hold out is to duck and dodge the consequences of what theyve done forever. She wants to save them all, she wants to see them burn.

She tears away and howls. The cry carries her up, shaking him loose, letting her, rise up, along the slopes of the volcano, letting all her hopes fall away behind her.

She lands broken on the scorching rocks of the peak.

Almost instantly, the gods wrap her up in their peace. She sinks to her knees. Her body feels so strong, so honed and powerful. But the soul inside has shrivelled. She is a fruit invaded by a worm. And yet, and

yet here, it doesnt matter.

She walks to the shrine and stands, in the glittering dark. Its like coming home, its the place she belongs, with the Fallen.

Of course, the thought comes into her head that she could stagger off the edge and let herself fall into the fire. But her weary feet wont move in that direction. What presumption, to fling herself into the gods realm as though she belongs there.

You led me, didnt you? You led me to Britomartis. You put me through the fire, to make me ready to do what you want.

They dont answer in words. A wind rushes through the shrine, the crystals glow more fiercely. A little flame ignites in her heart. Shes right. She knows it. Shes been doing their will.

Or is she talking to herself? Telling herself what she needs to hear?

She prays like a child. Make me a stone, she begs them. She closes her, eyes, and the crystals glow inside her head, flecks of light in the orange-black of her vision. If Im a killer, let me be the killer. Let me be the one to put an end to the horror.

Gods, let it end. Let it all end.

They flow into her heart and her hands. They dont tell her anything, give her any instructions. But they soothe away her exhaustion, wash away bewilderment with certainty.

When she opens her eyes again, she knows what she wants to do.

That night, she comes to him. She hovers in the window, blotting the moonlight from his face. Hes sleeping tonight, sprawled on top of the bed, his body exhausted.

Slowly, inevitably, she lets the current carry her, over him.

She comes to rest just above him, letting the draperies of her silk brush gently across his skin. He doesnt stir; nothing disturbs that unforgivably innocent face.

But in his dreams, his eyes are darting about, like a trapped animal.

She holds herself there, feeling cold and impersonal as the wind. Shes clean now: washed in a hidden corner of the palace, her silks immaculate. Clean.

His eyes wander open.

Another angel? he murmurs through his sleep.

She gathers him up, without speaking, enfolds his body in the silk. Her arms cross behind his back, pinning his hands by his sides; her legs hook round his, holding him flat against her. Hes too close for her to see his face, cheek against cheek, the braids of her hair falling across his eyes.

Then she takes him up. Out of the window and into the wind, watching the ground shrink away like a chicken back into the egg. Higher and smaller; already she can feel the chill whistling through her. Shes grateful for the animal warmth of this other body pressed against hers; but even this close, his flesh feels cool and distant.

He isnt struggling. His body is peaceful and yielding. Perhaps he thinks this is another dream. Consequences are distant things to him: understood in abstract, dodged up, close. A man who treats being told to face the music as an invitation to dance.

But now, she has him pinned. His hands held in place, the magician out of tricks.

I didnt want the last, angel either, says a soft voice in her ear.

Her grip tightens suddenly, but she says nothing as she continues to rise.

She came to me as I lay wounded and fallen. All my plans and hopes laid low by one inescapable act. She looked down on me, a creature of infinite compassion and unwanted mercy. And she stopped my heart.

For a moment she cant feel her own. Below the islands have vanished into the night; theres nothing with her but the fast shivering rhythm of his heartbeat.

But then she started it again. She picked me up, from the ashes Id left and gave me a clean slate, another chance. What did I do to deserve that?

Its not a teachers question. She can feel his breath shaking, his hands trying to clutch onto her hips.

Why am I still alive?

Shh, she tells him. You wont need to worry much longer. She comes to rest in the air. His hair is blowing across her, face in the thin wind, her own braids enveloping him.

Say something terrible, she wills him. Let me see all your frivolous disregard laid bare. Let me know that Im justified in what Im going to do. Let this moment be my purifying fire and burn away my doubt. But the man in her arms says nothing, just holds close for comfort, perverse to the last.

The King, and his people have so much, she tells him. Things they havent earned.

Some are the gifts youve brought down from the heavens, some are things theyve stolen, which youre letting them keep. But there are always consequences. I want you to think about the fact that you gave me the gift that brought you up here. You turned me into an instrument for something greater.

She takes a final breath.

Because that means this is your fault, not mine.

And she lets him go.

Slow, flickering motion: pale white face and skin revealed falling past her eyes. The strange, slow juddering of the world in flight gives her time to study his face the impenetrable look as his eyes find hers while they sink away but not to understand it.

It takes an age until hes beyond her, reach.

Another age until hes lost in the dark below.

Suddenly she feels naked, her front no longer shielded by his body from the wind, as it sucks the last of his warmth away. Theres nothing else in the clouds that can touch her now.

Was that last look one of realisation? No, thats merely what she wanted to see; his expression was too calm for him to be making the connections she wanted him to make.

But still she cant imagine his quicksilver mind not realising, before the rocks turn him into meat, that hes earned this for his interference.

He has perhaps a slow count of thirty. Longer through her eyes, with

the distorting effects of the currents. It feels like its going to be forever.

Perhaps it was the look of one who thinks he knows that this is a test. Maybe down below, hes plummeting serenely as the moments fall away, expecting her to snatch him away from death at the last moment. Which means he still might never realise his misplaced faith in her protecting him from the truth until he can no longer think.

The fury tightens her chest, stiffens every muscle in her body. He has to die in order to learn. If he doesnt know he deserves to die, whats the point? No, that look was the smug pity of someone who has forgiven those who sin against his blameless body.

No. Not forgiveness. Not even that he saw it as a test. His fear was for her. With a surge of fire in the wind, she sees what his eyes said: that as he fell it wasnt him being tested, it was her.

In a rage she throws herself over, screams straight down through the sky, the world flickering past her, faster than she can imagine. Half-formed words churn in her throat. Telling herself she doesnt want to pass his test, that this is still about getting through to him before the end. If he doesnt understand, then its as meaningless as Britomartiss sudden unrepentant stillness.

Falling fast as a stone. The mountain below draws itself out of the dark, growing ever larger. Finally the Doctor turns from a pale dot to a rigid figure arms folded across his chest, falling supine, trying to hold himself stiff and together. Even closer, matching his speed. Falling with him from inches above. The tightness in his face as he struggles to steady his breath and not cry out. Below his shoulders, the treetops mass.

His eyes open and lock with hers, unblinking.

Two more seconds.

She waits.

One.

With a choked-back scream of frustration, she wraps her arms and legs around him and pulls sharply upwards.

They hang frozen five feet above, the ground. Against her chest she feels the Doctor letting out a shaky breath. Dont say it, she shouts.

Dont even think it. Dont you ever understand?

As she turns them upright and prepares to settle them on their feet, he clutches onto her. His eyes wide and urgent. No. Dont, dont put us down!

Why not?

Were still falling. Dont you understand? Were both falling.

His words dont make any sense. But something instinctive, something beneath her senses, is telling her theres something wrong.

His words come out in a panicked babble, clutching on to her. You couldnt have brought me to a stop that quickly without pulverizing us both. This isnt real flight. All youre doing is, every instant, youre jumping yourself up, as far as youve fallen in that moment. Cancelling acceleration but not momentum. And now youve matched the speed of my fall, youre falling as hard as me. When you land and let go of the currents well both hit as hard as I would have anyway!

He stares her, in the eye, gasping now, begging as hard as shed ever imagined.

Youve got to go to the water. Please. For both our sakes.

And she follows his words to the sea. Flying, she can clearly feel the wrongness

sluggishness, a wrenching in the small of her back as if shes straining to hold her height.

Hes gasping: Here, that should be deep enough. Turn us over got to hit the water smoothly. Feet first.

His face drives her mad finally she can see the desperation in it, but none of it directed at himself. Its all about saving her.

Theyre a short way from the island now, hanging in darkness. She lets an updraft lift them, slowly if she sinks her nails into that current as she falls, it might slow them, just enough.

Hed spoken of angels, creatures of grace, who broke his fall when it was he who should have been broken. Did he have any idea how unforgiving they were, when they let him live?

She feels his arms tighten around her.

Now, let go.

The ocean hits like a hammer. Breath driven from her chest as she falls, water bursting into her throat. Still driving downwards, far deeper than she should be, the force carrying her down to no return. Desperately turning herself and fighting her way back up each choking cough sucking more ocean into her. It feels like its steaming where it hits the fire in her lungs. A hand reaches for her from the side; she shoves it away.

Even when she breaks the surface, the pain doesnt let up one more mouthful of sea water as she flails about. Her whole body convulses among the swells. Even breathing is torture. Now she knows why newborns cry.

He breaks the surface near her, great rasping gasps near her ear. The arm wraps around her again, trying to carry her home. She fights him off, is still fighting him off as they drag each other onto shore, pounding and screaming What does it take to make you learn?

With the last of his strength, he shakes his head. There are salt tears running down his face. I had the same question for you.

They dry out in a heap together, shivering, holding on to each other for warmth. She rests her head, against his; her sodden braids fall across his bare back like a scourge. His arm reaches round her shoulders, his hand nestling in her hair. Shes so cold now, that even his cool skin feels warm against her, through the thin briny silk soaking straight through to her bones.

I thought youd be able to fly so high, he whispers to no-one. But not this high.

Not so high that you froze on your way to the sun.

She shakes her head, fuzzily. I didnt fly. You fell. You were above me and now youre standing down there next to Rhadamanthys. Why?

You really believe every last one of you deserves death?

Everyone deserves death. Thats why everyone dies.

Except for the ones who have cheated it.

She can feel the weariness in his voice, the understanding. Finally she pulls herself to him, enfolding him as best she can, whispering to him.

And the ones whom angels spared.

They huddle on the rocks, watching the waves crash against the foot of the volcano just below them, the spray mocking their attempts to escape the water. Perhaps those tears she glimpsed were an illusion, she thinks. Just more salt water rolling off of his face as he gasped. But right now, shed rather dismiss the thought.

After a while, he asks her: Why do I deserve to be spared? Another small mercy?

She has being trying to understand it herself. You need to learn, she tells him.

Youre the only one who has any chance of it.

He shakes his head. Not the only one.

Every one of us ate of Athens, down to the lowest slave. Whatever else youve done, I can spare you from this.

She feels him turn his head, trying to catch her eye. When she doesnt move, instead she feels his chin against her cheek, his voice breathing in her ear. So let me spare you.

And for a moment, its that same feeling of promise that lifted her before.

But the truth drowns it out, fills her voice with ice. Youd spare Rhadamanthys. So how much does your mercy mean?

He freezes, his body tensed, and for a moment, she thinks hes going to pull away.

But he turns it into an exhausted shrug, a shake of his head. How long has it been since youve eaten, or slept? If nothing else, let me spare you from that.

And she relents, and lets him stand. She sees him looking down at her, his expression bruised but gentle.

After all, you shouldnt destroy the world on an empty stomach.

He leaves her to gather a few branches while he disappears into the woods, a pale streak in the moonlight among the trees. When he returns, hes carrying a pair of flints for a spark, and cradling a pigeon, its neck twisted.

I did it because I had to, he says.

He makes the fire dance to life, and they settle close together on the rocks, just far enough back from the spray, listening. The sea drowns out the crackle of the fire.

I know, it feels like your hearts broken, he begins, but then he tilts his head sideways, eyes wandering up to the sky. I really should have a word with whoever came up with that metaphor, he murmurs. Thats just not the way it works. Stones break. Ice breaks. Hearts are elastic.

His eyes have fixed on hers again. But if hes saying that her heart will recover, she cant believe it. The only feeling in her body comes from well below her heart, a suddenly insatiable stomach. Yes, the gods may have put the ideas into her head, but the need that drives her is below both heart and mind. A growling hollow that must be filled.

He removes the charring pigeon from the fire and offers it to her. She lunges for it, nearly falls over, then forces herself to breathe deep and chew slowly. But as the first mouthful slithers down her throat, she gags, her whole body convulsing and rebelling. He ends up holding her as she retches, an awkward tangle of shoulders and thighs around her side.

Hes still holding her, as she sits back, shivering. The fire is too tiny to warm her.

We swallowed their bones, she gasps.

I know, he murmurs. I know. Then, gently: How can you look upon that and want to kill even more?

What comes out now is a choking laugh. How can you look on that and not?

If you want death, theres plenty to come. I know whats going to happen to the empire. Ive seen it.

His voice settles down as well, his hand soothing its way through her hair. Hes her father telling her a bedtime story, one thats been turned inside out, a quiet murmur that says that the only happy ending is an unhappy one.

The empire will be struck down, destroyed so thoroughly that no-one even remembers its name. Only legends of the greedy island, which the gods themselves punished for its arrogance and sent crashing

beneath the waves. The stories of their wickedness will live for thousands of years, long after their lives are washed away.

Then why are you trying to stop it?

Because this isnt it. And nothing makes sense any more. She turns to him, looking for meaning, but his face is as unreadable as the rock they sit on. The eruption I know about is several centuries from now. Their crimes will catch up with them. But not for hundreds of years yet. Not until everyone involved in the crime is long dead, says Alcestis quietly. And thats all the justice you can offer?

He doesnt answer, just rests his head, forlornly on hers. She traces her other hand along his back, trying to memorise the shape of his shoulder blade.

She says: I know, how weak I am. They expect me to be strong. against the bulls, for them. And if Im supposed to be their greatest strength, and Im still so weak …

then theres no hope of anyone even trying for justice. Unless just once … just long enough to serve the gods … I can be strong. And end it.

And once again, she lets him go. She stands, and its like shes seeing him from far away now, distant and still. He tries to keep reaching her, but none of his words can drown out the lingering taste of flesh in her throat.

He tries one last time, on the rocks as the waves crash, shouting to make his voice heard over the noise of the world. His face spray-soaked again. They cant escape the water or the icy wind, or the stone.

Please, he tells her, his eloquence exhausted. Ive burned so many for the best of reasons but that doesnt end fire. Just dont go down that road.

And he stands, there, reaching out his hand. But now, she sees what it is he wants from her a cleansing, one more chance to outrun the uncountable number that he must have burned with his touch. Oh, she will teach him otherwise. She lunges for the offered hand, yanking it up in front of his face; with her other hand she grabs his chin, forcing him to look at what hed offered her. Her words hit him with all the force of the cold ocean.

This wont save you, she tells him. No more than it could save me. For

what youve done, no god, would forgive you.

And she holds him there, staring deep into his quiet, wounded face, her, hand gentle now, on his cheek.

And whispers But Im not enough of a god.

Slowly she lets him go, turns half away to gather herself. Find a ship, she says.

Fly from here. Be gone before the blessing ceremony tomorrow. I want you to live, and to learn.

A moments embrace gently, formally and she disappears into the sky.

Sometime before dawn, the Doctor, in the palace forge. He isnt going to make it.

He cradles in his hands a tangled web of thin strands of steel and bronze, each insulated from the other with tiny twists of fabric. A labyrinth of charges and wire, a cage for a tiny piece of fire.

The nagging fear mounts as sunrise finds him still bending wires into place. Hed been working on the assumption that hed have days at least before the next demon attack, based on the currents. He hadnt thought of the blessing ceremony.

He gingerly puts down the device. Its so elegant, such a clever little concoction of anachronistic technology and simple magic … not magic. Not gods. Life forms evolved at a bizarre angle, the same thing on a hundred worlds, with their technology-less science of time.

They would never need the last tool that hes forged from his last bit of steel.

Times run out, and he may have no other choice but to use it.

Stay here. Dont put yourself in the path of choices.

His hand curls around the last tool. No.

Its going to be a perfect hot day on Kaménai: the smell of the white-rippled sea and the volcanos hearth, the cloudless sky cupping the suns red-orange eye.

Deucalion sits in the window of his palace room, dangling his feet outside, watching the sky lighten as the suns chariot nears the

horizon. Perdix warned him warned them both not to look directly at the suns disk. So he just glances at it now, and again, tracing its rising arc.

Behind him, a manservant breathlessly announces that his father is here to see him.

For a moment, Deucalion contemplates staying in the window, his back to it all. But you dont do that to the King. He pulls himself down and straightens his tunic.

Perdix follows his father into the room. Rhadamanthys sits down on a stool and waves wearily for Perdix to sit as well. The teacher ends up hunched on the end of Deucalions bed.

The King, says: You will not attend the blessing ceremony this morning.

Deucalion opens his mouth to protest, but Father silences him. He looks more shaken and unsure than hes ever seen him, but his voice is certain. You are the heir to everything I hold dear. We need to keep you safely away.

Something bads going to happen today, says Perdix gently.

Well, if its so bad, why are you going?

Deucalion looks from one to the other, panic scorching his scalp. The King, says: The people need their blessings. They need to see me leading them. If I am seen to falter, we become an empire built on fear and timidity.

Perdix says: Im going to try to stop it.

Deucalion isnt sure of either of them. Is Perdix going to stop the blessing ceremony itself, or just the bad thing? Does his father really want to lead, or does he just not want to bow his head, even to the gods?

What can he do about it?

His shoulders slump. All right. If you want me to stay here, Ill stay.

Rhadamanthys gets up and hugs Deucalion. A sudden grasping clutch father clinging to him for life. His voice shakes.

My son, my empire.

Dawn over the volcano. Today the vast red sun sits directly across the caldera from the open sanctuary wall, its fire blurred through the heat-haze at their feet. The air is heavy with sulphur and shining dust.

Rhadamanthys stands, arms spread high, his back to the gods and his face to the people. Through the sanctuary door, on the mountaintop outside, the cream of the nobility stand arrayed before him, paying witness to his transmission of the blessings to his people. His shadow stretches far in front of him.

To his left, in the wide mouth of the temple where it faces the fire, the musicians hold one sustained note on shell trumpet or forminx willing the audience to lose themselves in the sound, a single endless moment of divine glory, the empires glory.

Slowly, fragments of rhythm begin to pick themselves out of the primeval chord: slow, emphasised, growing in speed and strength. To his right, the circle of priestesses begin the slow crescendo of their dance, building up to the release. Led by Polyxena a last-minute standin for the recently ascendant Britomartis they find their first shaky footsteps settling into rhythm, guided by the goddess.

Behind the musicians stands, the Doctor, alone out of all of them watching the sky.

The rhythm accelerates, the priestesss chant swells to name the Titans: child-eating Cronus; Oceanus, the eldest; Hyperion; Iapetus; Astraeus, father of wind and stars; Phoebe; Crius. The King feels their strength unfolding within him. He feels their light flooding the sanctum.

He feels their heat searing his back.

And the Doctor, is the first to cry out as the stampede of fiery bulls rises to block the sun.

Their hooves shake the earth where they land. One has bounded over the sanctuary to crash upon the path: blocking the way down the mountain, forcing the fleeing nobles and their families back to where the other bulls close in. Guards, drilled in distraction, find themselves too outnumbered to control them. The airs thick with roars and screaming voices and the smell of scorched meat.

Nauplius, at the edge of the cliff, flings himself over to try to reach the switchback of the path below. He reaches it face-first and lies there, his neck cocked at an impossible angle. Above him, his wife and two sons stare frozen as a bull thunders through them. A childs charring

skeleton hangs from a horn for one second, then another, before the ashes scatter on the wind.

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In the temple, the light is too bright to bear. Even in front of the sun, the two bulls are hotter, yellow-white scorches overwhelming the red-orange surrounding them.

Their light floods every corner of the building, ripping away darkness and mystery to lay the plaster bare. Every flaw, every weakness is exposed. The crystals flare so bright the plaster smokes in sympathy. Polyxena cowers in a heap with the priestesses, like ants under a magnifying glass, while the bulls scatter the musicians. No matter which way she looks, or how tightly she screws her eyes shut, the light sears straight through her.

A merciful shadow falls across them. Polyxena looks up, cringing in awe. Its Alcestis immaculate, poised, light shining through her, billowing silk. Hanging with divine stillness in the chaotic air.

She tells them: Keep dancing.

The Doctor, bullfighting for his life. Before ascending the mountain, he tucked as many shiny objects as he could find though in this light everythings a shiny object inside his ceremonial robe. Now, one after the other hes waving them, tossing them aside, distracting the bulls long enough for the musicians to flee.

(Into the gauntlet of the other bulls outside, but theres only so much he can do at one time.) Hes moving faster than he can think, reduced to nothing but a ceaseless impulse to act. He jabs the nearest bull with a discarded lyre, finds himself holding a crumbling stick.

No sign of Rhadamanthys. But he hasnt passed him, so he hasnt made it to the door.

No sign of the gods either; he imagines them sitting back in chilly satisfaction as their emissaries do their work.

Across the haze. Alcestis. Whirling circles round the other bull, teasing it away from the priestesses as they clamber to their feet. A streak of white, horizontal against the ground.

He dives out of the path of his bull, skitters across the floor to land almost beneath her. He hesitates only a moment, watching her hover,

weighing her expression.

Ive got a plan, he says. Follow my lead.

A final offer, a final temptation.

***

Rhadamanthys, crying out in the antechamber. Hes crammed into the narrow end of the wedge-shaped room, just past a window too small for him. A cluster of guards and nobles outside have tried to pull him through, to no avail. Behind him, a bull wrestles its horns free from the plaster. At this end, the room, is too narrow for its head, and shoulders to reach him, but it seems determined to demolish the wall itself if need be. This close, the King can feel his face beginning to blister and scar already from its heat. Wherever he looks, everything he thought was his to command has turned its strength on him.

Perdix! he shouts through the fire.

And theres movement beyond the bull, a pale man and a white ghost.

Perdix! he shouts again. Free me!

Then confess, says the Doctor.

Rhadamanthys freezes, incomprehension in his eyes.

About Athens. About your children.

A shudder goes through the Kings rigid frame.

Ill save your empire, not your throne. Youll face the consequences, but youll live.

The bull snorts sulphur at him, and Rhadamanthyss last control shatters. He shouts to the guards and nobles, to anyone who will listen, about the massacres in Athens, about the children he laid on the altar. A warning glance from the Doctor is enough to keep Deucalions name out of it.

Still, one by one, the meaning dawns on the faces at the window, a further horror drowning out their panic, as they make the link between their Kings actions and the bulls surrounding them. Hes treated the gods like slaves. Hes slaughtered his own kin.

I did it in the name of Cronus, cries, Rhadamanthys, his voice

breaking. Time eats his children and so have I. The faces stand frozen at the window. Then a bull outside circles for another pass, and the watchers scatter. Not one waits for the King. The Doctor turns to Alcestis, quiet inside the storm. Justice.

He begins to strip off his red-and-blue ceremonial robe, to wave over the bulls head, and distract it. But Alcestis is already leaping above, the bull, bracing against the ceiling, pulling Rhadamanthys straight up, over its head. He gasps with relief and folds into a ball across her, arms.

Alcestis… warns the Doctor.

I know what you want me to do, she assures him.

But he follows her anyway as she flies through the sanctuary, before the bull can turn and charge after them.

She watches Rhadamanthys whimper as she flies out through the open wall, over the volcano. His face is a mass of wrinkles and scars, one eye milky and staring, half his beard burnt white. Hes got a death-grip on her collar as he looks for the safety of land. She isnt circling round the outside wall of the sanctuary then he notices the other clear spaces on the far side of the caldera, outside the horde of bulls encircling the guests. He realises where she is heading, and gradually he begins to relax.

She looks down at him.

She whispers: Cannibal.

Then she flips heels-over-head and lets him go.

He screams all the way down into the magma. But his scream is lost in the cries of the panicking nobles, and even those are barely a thousandth part of the screams of Athens echoing endlessly in her head.

At any moment, the Doctors mind is a flock of startled birds. A thousand thoughts, each one circling in its own chaotic direction.

This moment, only one within the flock notices the distant dot of the King falling.

The cry that the Doctor lets out isnt for Rhadamanthys. But only a few of the thousand thoughts are able to mourn for Alcestis, even for a

moment, because the rest of them are scouring the sanctuary for survivors amidst the burning plaster and crystal-fire. There are only the priestesses, as yet untouched, caught up in their weaving dance as if the force of their belief will save them.

Theres still a chance for her, one part of him insists. That may have been the extent of Alcestiss crime of passion. And she was dancing with the demons before, playing them for time; if she has finally thrown her lot in with the gods, why would she fight their bulls?

Bulls. Another of his thoughts touches on the word and spirals off. Only a matter of minutes before they flare out, and the survivors outside will be able to flee. The demon behind him is still extracting itself from the antechamber. The other rounds away from the charred remains of a musician, paws the ground and readies to charge straight at the priestesses.

Only seconds. He gets in its path, waving the red-and-blue robe, leading it to the side away from the oblivious dancers. He spins and tumbles away, holding the instantly tattered remains. But the moment, his eyes can focus, he can see that the bull hasnt changed course, that its horns are still levelled at the priestesses

hearts.

Until it veers at the last moment. And the priestesses continue untouched, their fear only honing the dance.

Now, Alcestis glides in, her face cold and noble, and settles inside the centre of the circle. Polyxena is lost now, swept up in the rhythm. They are all Alcestiss to command, their minds laid open to the Titans. And shes beginning to speak the words that will redirect the energy that is being raised here, use it to shatter the prison gates.

The bull doesnt attack. Of course it doesnt. Even when she danced with it, that was only for show, a distraction, to assure the priestesses she was on their side. The whole rampage of the bulls, a means to drive away and distract those who could stop her.

Oh, my child, you have learned.

And the gods start rattling inside the Doctors head.

Alcestis stands, like a statue in the centre as he reels. As the tremors build up, to a climax around her, every stone and bone in the sanctuary dancing. At last, she is unmoved.

The Doctor has dragged himself past the bull, arms stretched blindly at angles, ploughing into the circle of dancers. Crying out, stop, please stop, for the love of the world, please. But no matter how he tries to make the dancers stumble, the current of the dance pulls them onwards around him, the rhythm unbroken.

She descends upon him. Gently she lifts him, feels him flailing unseeing against her, as she sweeps him away. Behind her, the dance continues to build. He stiffens when the wall of heat hits them from below, as she sails over the vast sea of fire. He clutches onto her, bare skin slick with sweat against hers, half-formed words tumbling endlessly from his mouth. Furious and helpless inside his own head. A hand fumbles at her throat for the pressure point, but the gods gaze is robbing him of any hope of finesse. He must know by now put her to sleep and when she wakes she will be undaunted; any cage he puts her in, she can escape. She will not be stopped.

On the slope of the mountain, she eases him down, stands him on the path as he recovers his senses. Floats just above him and watches as he realises she hasnt dropped him.

She points down the path. Go. Get far enough away, whistle for your ship. (He just looks at her, glassily, then immovably. Frustration now.) Would you really rather die than live with what youve done?

Like a polished shield, his face reflects the question right back at her. She forces herself to be calm; if shes going to act for the gods, she needs their same sense of distance. You might still make it to safety, she tells him.

He shakes his head, slowly. Dont lie to me now.

For an instant, shes shamed. Theres still a chance, she says, her voice quiet amidst the din. I gave you every chance.

His eyes are, meeting hers, dead-on. As did I.

The screams from above are fewer now. Hes breathing hard, looking around for an alternative, his eyes desperate with a thousand arguments, but theres no more time, no more.

She turns, and soars back up toward the sanctuary. As she banks, she catches just a glimpse of him running up the path, towards the bull waiting at the peak, one hand to his head to try to hold it in place. Straining to make his way back as well.

So be it.

She returns to the circle of priestesses to the furious speed of their dance, their strained honey voices helplessly singing up the end of the world. Their chant merging with the sound of a thousand pairs of wings, fluttering, gaining strength, turning into the boom of thunder, the sound of a great door creaking open.

The bulls, flaring their last.

The temple shaking, the priestesses stumbling but not stopping, and Alcestis untouched by the building tremors, floating half a foot off the ground, the words catapulting out of her, arms flung up, fists clenched, as though the whole of the gods power must be driven up and through her body to its escape.

The Doctor clutching onto her from behind.

His arms crush her just below the ribs. She gasps with the shock, then recovers her place and starts forcing the last words out.

The breath wont come.

She wheezes, struggles to speak, feels the built-up moment evaporating. Even the earthquakes are frozen. Around her the dancers are stumbling, staring at the two of them in horror.

He loosens his grip, but the pain doesnt ease. She cant hold herself up, she falls back against him, his arms cradling her now as he sinks to his knees. In his free hand hes holding a blade, made of a strange grey metal stained with red, pointing straight towards the continuing pain just under her heart. The spreading red stain soaking through her white silk.

His agonised whisper in her ear. Why didnt you stop?

Tableau:

Alcestis, sprawled on the Doctor, one hand trying to hold in her lifeblood. The Doctor fallen backward on his knees, carrying her weight, the knife still in his hand. Both slick with sweat, gasping to breathe, amid the smoke and rubble and the hellish light. Around them the dance, collapsed into chaos: priestesses descending on the Doctor in hysteria, but pulled away by surviving soldiers. Accusations flying this way and that he should die for killing her, she should die for killing the King, the King should die for his crimes against the gods

and men, any or all of them guilty and justified.

Amidst the spreading chaos, the two figures at the centre are perfectly still.

How could you? she gasps.

You wanted me to take responsibility. Accept the consequences. Im responsible for you …

But no matter how calm he keeps his tone, his voice sounds shakier than hers.

He shifts beneath her, trying to make her comfortable. Her shoulders have fallen back against his, his mouth reaching forward close to her ear, cruel in its intimacy.

Theres still a chance, he whispers, and her guts spasm. He actually wants to give her, comfort right after doing what he did. Right after proving that he could do to her what she hadnt been able to do to him.

The pain is vast and sprawling, it smothers almost all other feeling. But shes used to that. Since she learned the truth, she has lived like this, she has learned to let her rage overwhelm even that which threatens to overwhelm her.

And if pain is what he wants to give, then pain it is.

With a final effort she reaches for the currents. Instead of skimming across them, she dives headlong into them, as she did on that first day.

And when she vanishes, the Doctor is left kneeling among the ashes on the sanctuary floor, surrounded by people in search of answers. A sagging marionette, trying to hold on to something thats no longer there.

She cannot see here, because there is nothing to see. The currents she drowned herself in have pulled her to a place of stillness: her whole body somehow immersed, but feeling no need to breathe, for while she hangs in this moment, she will never reach the moment, where she has run out of breath. This place is like jumping up and not falling back down again.

Here the gods whisper around her. She can feel their comforting

fluttering, the rich, cool darkness of their presence. They are reaching out to her, their long spiny fingers reaching inside her wound, ageing it to wholeness. A hundred hands running over her, reshaping her body, soothing her mind, filling her with certainty as they mould her into their perfect instrument.

Throughout, she nurses the tiny diamond of fire within her, letting her fury give her purpose. This will not go unpunished, she vows. It will not end.

Five: Fall

Only a corner of the workshop is left intact a single wooden box, carefully sealed with a lock of his own design.

Inside the box is a collection of long, precise metal shapes, and a neat pile of patches of coloured cloth, carefully snipped from what was left of the parachute. The scraps cushion the wire cage: painstakingly precise curls of extruded metal combining into a shape that can be picked out only after a long time looking. At its centre, a single fire crystal, never touching the metal of the cage, suspended perfectly by its own matrix of energies.

Could anyone here make another of the cages? Not without the gods help. They might intuitively grasp whats needed, they might be able to puzzle out the materials, but they would never have the mathematics.

The rest of the workshop is a shattered wreck. The miniature furnace has been disassembled, the individual bricks smashed into chunks and dust, the fuel flung into the sea. Here and there are melted splashes of metal: tools and ingots alike, diluted with copper until theres nothing left of steel in them. In the corner, the spyglass, its lenses shattered and the pieces ground to powder. Even the wooden workbench has been attacked, lest it give away some secret of the alchemical goings-on it has seen.

Nothings left of it but a dull glow, the last of the embers used to destroy the hut.

The Doctor scuffs a wave of dirt over the embers with his sandal, then another, until the last of the glow has turned to ash. He stands over the wreckage of his workplace, still holding a good bronze axe, a little nicked now, after this last bout of effort.

He tucks the axe under his arm, lifts the box, steps out of the ashy ruin into the daylight. Deucalion steps along the path towards the low smudge of woody smoke.

His coronation has just been handled by half a dozen dishevelled priestesses.

Fumbling their way through the invocations, glossing over various gods in light of the mornings events, dedicating themselves today to Poseidon in a temple built for Oceanus. (Or approximately half a temple, overlooking a new crevasse.) They gave him his new kingly name, and took away his old one, but he still feels like a Deucalion.

Still, at least Deucalion had learned from the council sessions. When he stepped off the temple dais, he immediately asked the surviving courtiers and ministers to send a ship across to Akrotiri, to see what damage the earthquakes had done. He made it sound kingly and decisive, not just the instinctive reaction of an overgrown boy (is everyone all right?). If nothing else, sending his courtiers bustling bought him the time he needed to slip away.

After everything thats happened, the destruction of the workshop doesnt seem surprising: whats more smoke in a sky full of smoke? Nonetheless, he calls out in alarm:

Perdix?

Your majesty.

Deucalion turns, sharply. Perdix is standing behind him, body and hair smeared with soot, wearing a heavy cloak even in the mountains heat. He looks like a wild man, but his voice is soft. Congratulations. How does it feel to be an unrivalled superpower?

Deucalion cant answer that. I need to know what to do, he says. But he catches himself before continuing, starts thinking it out the way Perdix has taught him. We know who are responsible, who are threatening us, we need to know how to act against them.

And then what?

Deucalion blinks. What do you mean?

If someone offers a way to fight the gods, how will you find a way to fight them?

Deucalion doesnt know what Perdix is asking. He hopes it looks like hes considering it thoughtfully. But Perdix isnt looking at him, hes scanning the sky as though for fresh disaster. Careful who youre strengthening. If you build up one wild force to tear down another … Well, you saw how well that worked.

Its clear now. So you think I might be setting myself up for a coup.

Perdix presses his hands to his forehead in despair. No, no, no. Its not just about you.

The people … My people …

Its all connected. You have to think beyond this moment.

Theyll have to get used to living without the gods blessings.

Perdix says: The future will remember these days as a golden age, not a bronze one.

But you know …

I know it cant be sustained. So I have to ask the people to expect less?

Perdix nods. They wont love you for that. Theyll fight tooth and nail to sustain it anyway. Youll have to teach them that they cant take plenty as their birthright.

So we lose our golden age, says Deucalion hotly, and then, at some future time, we lose everything. And what am I supposed to do?

Learn from my mistake, your majesty. Have your hindsight first. Do the best you can, not just the best at the moment. Unless you learn to think outside the usual reactions, it does not end.

Deucalion swallows, and makes his first real decision as King. I know what to do.

Will you help me?

Perdix is whistling a foreign tune that Deucalion doesnt recognise.

The teacher walks behind Deucalion. Everyone walks behind him two score of the royal men-at-arms, the very best and bravest. They wear no armour; theyd cook like crabs in the holy mountains hissing heat. Besides, no bronze protects from the gods, any more than it protects from old age. But Perdix insisted they bring their shields anyway. Near-naked men march behind demon faces and swirling patterns.

Perdix is singing to himself. He marched them up, to the top of the hill, and he marched them down again.

Deucalion slows down, which means Perdix and everyone else, slows down. After a moments confusion, he commands: Walk beside me.

Perdix catches up, with a couple of quick strides. Deucalion says: I dont care for your song.

I apologise, your majesty.

The new King, lowers his voice. We wont be marching down again. Everyone here understands that.

Perdix says: Theyre not following you in despair, your majesty. Theyre following you in hope. If you succeed today, youll have the reputation of a ruler who knows what to do.

For a moment, the long future flickers in Deucalions sight. What shall I do then, Perdix? With my hundreds of stolen years?

Learn.

Of course, teacher.

No, no, you dont get it. Learn everything. Learn people, learn the past, learn possibilities. Learn what you dont know. Learn what nobody knows. Learn that even the answers youve learned probably dont fit the newest questions. Hundreds of years isnt enough for you to learn everything about everything, but its a start. Crisis points pass, passions burn away, wealth and power shrivel like flowers in a drought.

But youll never find yourself, without a purpose so long as you go back to your wellspring of questions about what surrounds you. Youll outlive any remnant of the days that made you, but youre not likely to

outlive your world.

He stops, suddenly, his teeth catching his bottom lip, as though hes said something he wishes he hasnt. Then Perdix looks up, looks around, trying to lose himself in the world that surrounds him, one last time.

At that moment, Deucalion realises that, for all Perdixs words of the future, hes still saying these things because he doesnt expect to be here to say them later on.

The first catapult missile falls short of the sanctuary by only a few feet. As if in response almost certainly in response theres a trembling and a rumbling, and a gout of lava bursts from the holy mountain like a jet of hot blood.

The second missile hits. It caves in half the wall of the temples front and flies on into the caldera. Deucalion has a good view of it from the wide ridge below. He raises his arm and gives a war cry to match his mens cheers.

Their real target is not the masonry, but the crystals inside, set into their niches on the walls. Perdix said the crystals were the eyes with which the gods looked into the world, the doors and windows through which they reached into the world. Smash them, bury them, scatter them across the islands to isolate them, lob missiles into the magma itself to break as many of the crystals floating there as possible. Refuse the gods gifts and their curses forever.

Another hit, onto the roof this time not much damage. Immediately the men are, loading another missile into the catapult, but now theres a buzzing in the air, as if they are surrounded by bees. He looks round, and his soldiers can hear it too, some of them slapping at their ears, one or two covering them to block out the swelling sound.

A great gout of flame bursts upwards from the caldera, raining handfuls of hot magma down on them. The men raise their shields, acting instinctively, and are saved from the worst of it. The mountainside is shaking like a man in a fit.

Thats not the worst of it. Rising out of the flame are a pair of the demon bulls, bronze hooves pounding the air. Deucalion has never actually seen one; his nerve almost fails at the sight, as they come roaring down over the ruins of the sanctuary.

But Perdix gives a shout of laughter. What! Only two! They must be more exhausted than I thought!

He throws off his cloak. Underneath, he is bewinged.

Deucalion stares. Out from Perdixs shoulders, tethered to his elbows and his wrists, spring birds wings made of a fine, shining silver metal. In place of feathers, there are coloured shapes of cloth, filling up, the framework. On his back, between his shoulder blades, there is a single speck of caged light: a crystal in the centre of a metal cats-cradle.

Perdix dips his head, and flexes the wings. A moment later, he rises from the ground, lighter than the feather he dropped that day from the roof of the palace.

Without a word, he rises up towards the bulls, which have actually stopped their headlong rush, astonished by this new apparition. He passes through clouds of sulphurous steam, free of the convulsing earth.

The men are shouting as they fight to keep their balance, a mixture of cries of fear, and surprise, and bewilderment, and pain as drops of magma slip between the shields.

Steady! cries the King. Weve started the task, now lets see it through!

Deucalion runs up to his men, helps them get the next missile into the catapult as chunks of lava rain down around them. A soldier holds a shield above his King, as the battle goes on.

Alcestis laughs and laughs. It is a laugh she cant hear. Theres no sound here in the gods realm, and yet theres nothing but sound, roaring and swooping harmonies that blot out everything else.

The Doctor dances like an elephant would dance. He lurches, flapping his new wings, losing height in bursts, turning in sudden jabbing movements. She can see that they give him no lift thats the crystals work. She can also see hes had no time to practise with them. His gleeful look has twisted into a grimace, like that of a child who has just discovered the lyre and now discovers that he can manage barely more than lurching discords. He knows hes an intruder, in a world where hes not welcome.

But he can move fast, and his clumsiness is a virtue, as the bulls

grown smart with the adventures of their predecessors try to second-guess his moves. He is as likely to drop out of their path accidentally as to dodge them deliberately. They are already losing form and strength, turning back into the smoke from which they were born.

Shes ready to finish the lesson now. But not yet, not just yet.

First the King.

Deucalion flinches back, hiding his face behind his shield. Its a goddess, tall, grim-eyed, dazzlingly beautiful, too brilliant to look at directly. Out of squinting, watering eyes he makes out parts of her, shape, part woman, part sacred dove. Which goddess is this? Or is it a Titan? Harpy? Siren? Gorgon? Fury?

His men fall back from her, not running, bless them, but stumbling back from the apparition. The King, holds his ground. He knows he has to hold his ground, he has to show them they mustnt give up, even though he cant see a thing.

She comes forward and gathers him up, in light.

Her touch is as firm and gentle as that of a woman holding a baby. Even as she lifts him over the volcano, over the red and hungry steaming mouth of hell, he feels safe.

All he can think of is his own mother.

She tells him, very gently, that he has to die, and asks if he knows why.

Its not fair! The words erupt from him like a childs cry. It wasnt my fault, I was going to do right! Thats what Im trying to do now!

He tries to clutch at her, but shes as insubstantial as smoke. How can smoke hold him up?

A scream tears out from deep in Deucalions belly.

Everything is suddenly blackness and tumbling motion. But not downwards into the volcanos maw along, sideways, so fast that the breath is knocked from him. Or perhaps its the priestess tumbling onto him with a curse. Their bodies connect in the muffled lightlessness in a way thats most untoward.

Alcestis lets out another imprecation, and abruptly shes gone, like a

mote blinked out of the eye. Now, shes gone, he can see a little light penetrating the space that hes inhabiting. With a jolt, Deucalion knows where he is: inside Perdixs cloak, being carried along by the flying inventor like a hare in a sack.

The King, fights down the urge to struggle, clasping his hands together to prevent his arms from flailing in panic and gritting his teeth as he feels the grounds nearness. Perdix barely slows as he puts his burden down on the ridge.

Deucalion rolls out of the woollen cloak, panting, bruising his elbows on the hard stone. Perdix stands over him awkwardly, trying to straighten out the metal wings.

They are detached from the inventors wrists now, sticking out at odd angles.

He opens his mouth to ask, but Perdix says: Your people need you.

With a harsh shrug, he lifts into the air. Deucalions head tips back to follow him, and he looks straight up into Alcestis, diving down towards him like a hawk on a mouse.

In the next instant, theres a rainbow tangled with her. Perdix tries to pull her down, one wing loose from his wrist, metal and cloth battling the air. Deucalion cant believe theyre not falling, hard, to the rocks. But theyre rising, gradually.

Perdix is shouting, his voice lost in the wind and the thump of the catapult and the choking sounds as the mountainside vomits lava.

Ah, Alcestis, says the Doctor, with a wide, wild grin. Shall we dance?

Alcestis smacks him in the mouth, once, and then again. She doesnt want to hear his words, magic words that change the world around him, change people, the words that changed her. He says her name as they battle for height, and she rams her elbow into his face before he can say anything more.

They slap and push at one another. She grabs a handful of his hair and wrenches his head to one side, while he grabs her, shoulders in a painful grip. This is no contest: she can control her flight and he cant. Already his toy wings are battered and bent. But she cant seem to shake him loose.

Alcestis grimaces. Its the crystal he wears on his back, sending violent

ripples across the current shes riding, like a wake tossing a tiny boat. Shes spending all her strength steadying herself against them.

Beneath them, the little King is winning his battle to slam the door on the gods, but it doesnt seem to matter, she cant think about that now. She tries to snatch at the wire cage from the Doctors back, but it seems to twist away from her grip each time her fingers close on it.

Heat below. In their struggle, theyve cleared the caldera wall. Alcestis focuses on climbing, getting up and away from that lethal heat. She speeds up, hoping the wind rushing downwards will knock him, loose, but hes got one hand tangled in her dress and has managed to lock his other arm beneath one of hers.

She remembers what happened with the bull over the ocean. If she can gain the same height, will he faint and fall? She drives upwards for the clouds. Hes got his fingers tangled in her hair. Theres blood coming from his mouth where shes split his lip.

Let go of me!

Its a breathless scream. She cant catch her, breath here. The bright glare of the clouds is darkening. She knows it will happen again, shell fall. Just please, please, let him fall first.

He looks grim, but hes not bothered at all. Hes speaking, but she cant hear the words. He doesnt even look as though hes breathing hard, while her whole body is wracked with every breath.

Alcestis dives until she can fill her lungs again. She draws in the air and bellows in his face: Let me go!

The Doctor grabs her hair and draws her face close to his, and shouts back: Ill never let you go!

Theyre still falling, down into the centre of the volcano. The walls rise up around them. Its like falling into a blazing summer day. And she realises: theyre not falling. Theyre being pulled down.

The Doctor seems to know, at the same moment. The fire crystal on his back flares as he tries to claw back some height, unsuccessfully. Nor can Alcestis rise.

Theyre in the grip of the Titans, being dragged down into Tartarus.

And still he wont let her, go!

The flames rise up around them. Theres an impact like being thrown through a stone wall, knocking the breath and the sense and the life out of her

And theres no time, no place, nothing but the jagged peak shes streaking towards, and the Doctor chained there, helpless against the wind.

Her wing-beats shaking the air. He looks around urgently for some escape, his head rolling against the rock, as she screams towards him, raising her talons. Oh, she relishes the way the gods have reshaped her into the perfect single-minded creature for their task. She wants nothing more than she wants this.

He twists in his chains, trying to escape. No more escapes. She reaches him, and rakes across his flesh, claws ripping through skin and meat. Tearing into him, as he tore into her.

He tastes moist and slippery, no different from any other animal. She buries her face inside him, beak reaching for morsels deeper in, his muscles straining around her, till she chews through them. When his breath heaves, she feels it from the inside, his ribcage scraping along her neck.

She leaves him, alive, once shes eaten her fill. Her feathers brush across his bare chest as she turns, and he gasps, as if this touch, is more cruel.

When she returns to the mountain peak, hes as new, not even a scar, and this spurs her, to even greater fury. How dare he be unmarked by what hes been through? How dare he look like a perfect symbol of what she knows is a lie, a lie?

This time, she takes extra care once shes finished feeding covering the rest of his body with bites and claw-marks, trying to drive her lesson home with every bit of flesh she breaks. Wounding him for every one of the uncounted dead, for every one he struck down himself, for all the ones hes tried to excuse. By the end of it, hes a foul, bloody mass, and now at last he looks like she feels.

Again she soars towards him. Again his skin is untouched. But theres a ghost-image of his blood across his chest, and more of a haggard look in his eyes, and she hopes he may yet learn.

He reacts less and less each time, she comes to him, until its like attacking the mountain top itself. She tries getting more extreme,

drinking more of the salt blood, but gets nothing more than a flinch, or a cringe, or the occasional moan. She lands on his chest afterwards and peers into his eyes beak almost touching the jelly

but theres nothing in them to show that hes engaged with her, in the slightest.

Come on, she screeches. Fight me!

It means nothing to break someone so uncaring, who will never learn.

But he just hangs there, giving no sign that hell make this easy for her.

She has no memory of where she goes when shes not attacking him. She leaves, and shes soaring right back, hungry again.

One time, she tries explaining draping her, wingtips across his shoulders, her beak working its way down his chest, leaving a precise trail of gouges and bites as she speaks. As long as you were, just a collaborator, you could live. You hands were, still just clean enough, you had a chance to change your ways. But then what did your hands do?

Now, she tears into his belly, right where the knife had gone. They took a life, she says after she swallows. You killed me. The gods spared me, but that doesnt spare you. Once the fire burns you, you stay burned. There is no hope.

She feels his head shake at that, or just loll. She wonders if hes even hearing her, words, or just the endless cries, of a hungry bird.

He doesnt break down, he doesnt accept, he must be fighting it, but he still doesnt give her a word. She has nothing to go on. She comes to him again, and again, his flesh ever more tasteless in her mouth, crowing to him about his damnation, demanding he resist it so she can have something to break. Sliding from righteous control to unalloyed frenzy.

Answer me, she shouts. Fight me. Tell me Im wrong.

Her wings flail as she holds herself in front of his heavy-lidded face.

Challenge me. Tear into me. Fight me. Kill me!

Her wings stumble in the air.

Then she tears into his belly even harder, trying to get the taste of her

words out of her mouth.

You stay burned. She can feel the scars where Britomartis was torn from her grasp, the sudden emptiness between her hands where Rhadamanthys had been. Surely giving up her hands should have stopped her feeling them?

When she withdraws from him, hes trying to speak.

You wanted me to take responsibility, he whispers. His throat is dusty from disuse.

Take responsibility for you. Take responsibility from you. Well, I did.

She peers at him, silently, from where shes holding on. Her wing brushes against the ragged edge shes left in his belly, and his muscles tighten in a useless spasm.

Even if that meant giving up, on what I believed in, my bloodless solution. And even then, I was half aiming to miss, just by enough …

A couple of bitter mouthfuls, and she turns to fly away, her appetite shrivelled. She feels his body sag beneath her, exhausted, his final words calling weakly after her.

Which I did.

The next time, shes not hungry. She rests on his chains, of that strange grey metal, at the point where they fuse with the rock. Looks down at his head, where it leans on the mountain.

Just say you did wrong, she whispers.

Which wrong, did I do?

Say you were wrong. To make me answer questions I wasnt ready to ask. To excuse the inexcusable. Not to give me an excuse.

I gave you what I could …

She can barely lift her head. Her screams diminished to a whisper. Just say it.

Lie if you have to. But say you were wrong, and we can both end this.

Slowly he raises his head his face inverted beneath her, his eyes showing her a hollowness she had yet to imagine.

You still dont get it, do you? You think it ends?

It must …

A shake of his head, a murmur. You think the gods just sent you here to break me, and then youll take your place by their side? Youre sentenced here, same as I am.

They made this environment from your mind and mine.

No …

If you cant free them, you mean nothing to them. Like me, youre better off out of the way.

She throws herself down to tear this truth out of him. But halfway down she stops her own wings and lets herself plummet, down along the rock face, closing her eyes and willing the ground to erase her. Falling and falling and never hitting bottom. Never stopping.

And she looks down and sees herself descending towards him, again, and lets out a scream that would tear through anyone for miles. If there were, anyone else, in the world at all.

Were caught in a fold of time, he says, as she wheels and thrashes over him. Stuck in a moment bent back on itself. No change, no end. No matter how many times you kill me.

It cant, she caws, the meaning of her own words almost lost under the noise. But his words wrap around her, low and raw and overwhelming.

Thats what this is all about, isnt it? The ending. The clean break youre looking for, where all the guilty are punished and the innocent live happily ever after.

Well, let me tell you whats going to happen after you die.

When the eruption comes, in centuries time, it wont be the end. Akrotiri will be erased, but the empire will not lie down so cleanly.

There will be no summer. The explosion will poison the sky for a decade, tsunamis across the Aegean sowing fertile ground with salt. Many will live, escaping a clean, righteous execution, only to starve over years. Gaunt brutes scraping out an existence in half-buried homes, the debris too thick to bother to clear away.

Authority will crumble, justice forgotten, kings abandoned now that its clear that they cannot protect the people.

Theyll sacrifice children, in an attempt to appease the gods, who have long since fled them.

It does not end.

Eventually even the gods, will fall. Rhea and her snakes will be driven underground.

Apollo with his lyre and his clear eyes will slay the Python, and claim the Pythias wisdom for his own rational domain.

Then even his kind will be laid low. The children will fall before new races of gods, and eventually divinity itself will wither in a world that sees no place for it.

But even then, it does not end.

His face, soft, hard, speaking truth. Mourning and accusing. Bloodied and weary and relentless.

She can hear no more. She raises her talons to her eyes, trying to drown out the pain. Her claws slicing in, the jab of her nails against the bone at the back

And again, she sees him beneath her as she descends.

She didnt know it was still possible to sob in this body. She ends up collapsing on the rocky peak, clinging to his chains for support body heaving, wings wrapped around herself for comfort.

Alcestis.

Its jarring to hear that name directed at this creature.

He cranes his neck to look at her, his human face looking outsized next to hers. We all fall down. You, me, kings, gods. Its not all we do.

The chains under her are quivering. Hes twisting a wrist back and forth in its manacle, contorting to scratch an itch. From the quiet, tight spike of frustration on his face, this now is the most agonising thing in the world for him.

She shuffles her body down toward him, and with her beak she gently scratches against his wrist. His whole body sags with release. She says:

But youve told me where it ends …

Even thats not the be-all and end-all. Theres so much more that can happen, things that havent even been thought of. You havent discovered C-sharp minor yet, or Darjeeling with lemon. Or representative democracy. Or that way you can taper the rim of your cups so you can pour with them more easily. None of that ends either.

His words are, so gentle, even honeyed. How can you say this? she asks, her head resting on his hand.

Because its true.

But how can you say it to me? How can you speak to me like you forgive me?

A half-curled smile.

Oh, Alcestis. You know how good a liar I am.

Her heart doesnt stop. It just sort of trickles away.

And his hand closes round her throat.

She can gasp, but barely. One eye pushed flat against the rock face, heart rattling her, body with panic. His face is cold, flat, a flake of stone. You just tortured me. In my mind, Ive wrung your neck and flung you down a thousand times. She thrashes, but her claws cant reach him, her neck cant turn without snapping. But Im still here, he continues. No matter how often I do it. And theres always another eagle where you came from. His clutching hand a million miles away from that raw hollow face. Almost a completely separate creature. Slowly, hesitantly now, eyes fixed as his fingers tighten. Therell always be another eagle … And she crumples, trying to sob through a blocked throat. I deserve it, she manages. Anything He cuts her, off, his voice shaking. No, not anything. You deserve a lot, but you dont deserve to die. But his hand refuses to let her, go.

Hes talking fast, talking to her, arguing against himself. Not for them using you in their crimes, not for executing them. Not even for me. No justice in killing someone who wants to die.

A final shake of her head. Shes stopped fighting him now, but still struggling for every whisper of precious air. How can he say shes worth sparing? A life sentence is no mercy.

You already tried … to kill me …

Theres a manic tightness round his eyes. And Id do it again, if there was no other way. There isnt always. But if there is, its a crime to miss it. Dont you see? Not just hit back. Not just the obvious and the ugly.

His guts are torn open and hes bleeding words. They come faster and faster, disconnected, washing over her. Even now hes healed, his seams are ripped wide open eyes pleading, crumpled voice trying to outrun tears, struggling to reach something beyond the grasp of his hands.

Lose myself in an ocean of possibilities. Always looking for something else, even if you dont know what when you start looking. Thats what Im supposed to do, isnt it?

Youve got to find another way … If you deserve to die, how can I deserve to live?

With all Ive done?

But he still cant let up. Her eyes are blurring, wash of red closing in. And his words rush on, carrying him, helpless in their wake.

Time and again, I have fallen into fire and the fire did not take me. Ive seen blazes claim whole worlds. Ive watched them burn around me. Theres blame enough to go around and around trace the path of the fire back through decades and centuries of cruelty and inattention but I can point to one moment when I failed to find another way. When I took the best way open to me. The great and the good, the cruel and the cowardly, all turned to silhouettes of ash.

I still stand. I stand where so many have turned to dust. If the fire spared me, it was not because I was worthy. What can I do but try to be worthy? If I am less than the best of those who were, lost, that would shrink the world. Even as the fire burns on, even if it does not end, I must not let it rob me of my own ability to stop!

And the air rushes back into her.

He sags against the mountain, breathing as hard as she is. Over each sweet breath she hears his murmurs, stray fragments, noises of sorrow and remorse. From her own mouth she hears the same sounds. Then there is silence, together, apart.

When the mountain top begins to melt, he closes his eyes and lets out

a sigh, draining the last of his breath from his lungs. Beneath her hands hands? she can feel the rock losing its rock-ness, the chains in flux.

At last, he murmurs.

Whats happening? she cries.

Either the gods, are, weakening, or were both going mad.

Whichever you prefer.

Everything is wavering, losing its edges, like a landscape through the shimmer of noonday heat. Even her own body, now translucent as finest linen. In this world, the Doctor is the only solid thing left.

Its the crystals that bind the Fallen to our world, says the Doctor, allow them to manipulate it. Like all this. With Deucalion and his men scattering them, burying them, their power fades. The bulls, all this, gone. When we came down here I gambled they wouldnt be able to sustain eternity forever, I was hoping it would give us enough time, together …

You came in here for me?

A ghost of a smile. Like I said, I was responsible.

Humbled, beyond thought, her, head, bows before him.

He brings his hands down, the chains stretching like toffee. She expects him, to fall, but theres nothing to fall to. When the time, comes, well need to ride the currents out of here. Youll need to fly blind, just dive in. One jump. If you dont … (His eyes find hers.) Well, its only a little way down into the magma, you wont have time to feel a thing.

The form the gods had convinced her was hers is falling away. In a few moments, she knows there will be nothing left. It can be over.

His eyes are those of a man in need of mercy. But now, even the form around them is coming apart now old, now young, both vast and tiny, a thousand embroideries on a basic truth. Something bigger inside than the shape that contains it.

She grabs onto him with all that remains of her. Theres a fire in her hands and she lets it burn through her, refusing to let go, holding on

to a single truth out of the body of contradictions. The man who, caught up in this violent world, claws and drags his way toward peace.

Now, up

And theyre falling, clinging to each other, the wind tearing through them and the only warmth their skin pressed together. Sunlight, so cold, the sky rolling wild around them and the tiny islands so far beneath. Shes gasping for air, sobbing and laughing and filling her lungs with as much as she can hold.

Here, she tells him, and holds him even tighter. Let me do this. And she reaches for the currents to carry them, but they arent there. She pulls back from his shoulder, catches his eye, sees his grave expression before she can speak. The gods were the source of the currents, he murmurs. And now theyre cut off. And all she can do is shake with laughter, the tears blasted from her face by the wind.

There are still some left, he tells her. No waves, just ripples.

Aftershocks. Going on for years. Possibly enough to support you.

I cant feel anything …

He taps the tangle of wires, the fire-crystal still strapped to his back, just above her arms. She cranes her neck over his shoulder; its still glowing, faintly.

This things interfering with you, so close. You can still fly but alone.

For a long moment, she just realises.

No, she says, and begins to rip the crystal from him.

He stops her with a gasp, his whole body tensing. The currents are too weak now. You couldnt carry me.

Ive got to!

So he lets go of her. Instantly, she grabs on with arms and legs, holding him to her pinning them both, the crystal beyond her reach. Alone. Its our only chance. (His eyes close wearily.) Your only chance. She hangs on fiercely. I cant … Well, it was easy enough for you a little while ago, he mutters peevishly.

Sorry, sorry. Not after all this …

Exactly. You throw your life away after all this, then it was pointless. You still dont get off that easily. You helped make this world, youve got to live in it.

She looks him in those hot-sky eyes. Theres no answer in them; he doesnt know which way the wind will blow her. But there is certainty.

Hes said everything he needs to.

She says: I cant do the things youve done.

He shakes his head. You never know. You might do better.

And he waits, for her to be ready.

She holds on, trying to feel every piece of him at once, trying to stay caught in the moment.

It takes every bit of herself to open her arms.

Slow, flickering, as the last faint currents take hold of her. He hangs below her, drifting into the distance, almost all his skin bare to the wind. Half-healed scars across his belly, crows-feet deep around his eyes. His face at peace, lost at last in the ocean of sky.

Then she dives into the currents and rides them straight down to the water.

Splashdown, feet first, arrowlike into churning dark. Driving upwards, breaking the surface into sunlight before the water makes her new fire falter. Already back in the air, eyes sweeping the sky, reaching for any sign of him.

The sky is empty.

On a scrap of beach west of Akrotiri, the waves wash over his wings. She finds them just ashore in the sand, twisted, half-melted. The crystal, peeks out of the shallows, its wires scattered along the shoreline. Of his body there is no sign.

She plucks a blue silken feather and holds it close chilled now, soaked through.

She stands, watching where the land, sea and air all meet.

Around her, she hears a strange fading grinding: mechanical wave-crash, a mis-blown wind. Perhaps this was all one final sleight-of-hand

on his part, a last dramatic exit. Maybe hes still running from those he burned, maybe he faces them with every action in the world hes made. But whether he lives or not makes no difference; he is gone. And she is here.

Slowly she lets the currents lift her; they falter and fade like a summer breeze, and she has to circle to gain altitude. No longer master of the currents, she must follow their flow, set her own course as she can within them. The summer sun warms and dries her.

Ahead there is smoke over Akrotiri, but no fire. Down there they will be trying to make sense of a world where the gods favour can no longer be taken for granted, where neither kings nor heroes can be trusted, but both still are needed. With luck there will be mercy there; if not, she will do what she can to make it. She has fallen so far, but shes the only one who can pick the pieces back up.

She settles to land, walking alone towards the sunset. It makes her think not of endings, but of all the days to come.

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Jonathan Blum and Kate Orman have been married for five years, writers for ten, and collaborators since some point in between. Together and apart, theyve produced eleven novels, a couple of audio plays, one direct-to-video feature film script, and an assortment of short films and short stories. Between the two of them, they have been nominated three times for the Aurealis Award for best Australian SF novel, and once for the Ditmar Award.

They live in Sydney, Australia, with occasional returns to Washington DC. Far more can be found out about them at their website, at: www.zip.com.au/~korman

Next up Kate is working on an original SF novel, while Jon is cowriting a novel based on the Patrick McGoohan TV series The Prisoner, for release in 2004 by Powys Media (www.powysmedia.com).